

# History

## ARCHAIC PERIOD (UP TO 2000 BC)

It's accepted that, barring a few Vikings in the north and conceivable direct transpacific contact with Southeast Asia, the prehispanic inhabitants of the Americas arrived from Siberia. They came in several migrations between perhaps 60,000 and 8000 BC, during the last ice age, crossing land that is now submerged beneath the Bering Strait, then gradually moving southward.

These early inhabitants hunted mammoths, fished and gathered wild foods. The ice age was followed by a hot, dry period in which the mammoths' natural pastureland disappeared and the wild nuts and berries became scarce. The primitive inhabitants had to find some other way to survive, so they sought out favorable microclimates and invented agriculture, in which maize (corn) became king. The inhabitants of what are now Guatemala and Mexico successfully hybridized this native grass and planted it alongside beans, tomatoes, chili peppers and squash (marrow). They wove baskets to carry in the harvest, and they domesticated turkeys and dogs for food. These early homebodies used crude stone tools and primitive pottery, and shaped simple clay fertility figurines.

## PRECLASSIC PERIOD (2000 BC–AD 250)

The improvement in the food supply led to an increase in population, a higher standard of living and more time to experiment with agricultural techniques and artistic niceties. Decorative pots and healthier, fatter corn strains were produced. Even at the beginning of the Preclassic period, people in Guatemala spoke an early form of the Mayan language. These early Maya also decided that living in caves and under palm fronds was passé, so they invented the *na*, or thatched Mayan hut – still used today throughout much of the country. Where spring floods were a problem, a family would build its *na* on a mound of earth. When a family member died, burial took place right there in the living room, after which the deceased attained the rank of honored ancestor.

The Copán Valley (in present-day Honduras) had its first proto-Mayan settlers by about 1100 BC, and a century later settlements on the Guatemalan Pacific coast were developing a hierarchical society.

By the middle Preclassic period (800–300 BC) there were rich villages in the Copán Valley, and villages had been founded at what came to be the majestic city (and modern Guatemala's number one tourist attraction), Tikal, amid the jungles of El Petén, northern Guatemala. Trade routes developed, with coastal peoples exchanging salt and seashells for highland tribes' tool-grade obsidian. A brisk trade in ceramic pots and vessels flourished throughout the region.

As the Maya honed their agricultural techniques, including using fertilizer and elevated fields to boost production, a rich, noble class emerged that indulged in such extravagances as resident scribes and artists – and temples, which consisted of raised platforms of earth topped by a thatch-roofed shelter very much like a normal *na*. The local potentate was buried beneath the shelter, increasing the site's sacred power. Pyramid E-VII-sub at Uaxactún, 23km north of Tikal, was a good example of this; others have been found at Tikal itself and El Mirador, another Petén site that flourished during the

*The Ancient Maya*, by Robert J Sharer, is a 1990s update of Sylvanus G Morley's classic 1940s tome of the same name. The first half of the book treats the Mayan story chronologically; the second half discusses different aspects of their culture. The book is admirably clear and uncomplicated.

*The Blood of Kings: Dynasty & Ritual in Maya Art*, by Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, is a heavily and fascinatingly illustrated guide to the art and culture of the ancient Maya, with particular emphasis on sacrifices, bloodletting, the ball game, torture of captives and other macabre aspects of Mayan culture.

**TIMELINE** 11,000 BC or earlier

First human occupation of Guatemala

Around 250 BC to AD 100

Early Mayan cities El Mirador and Kaminaljuyú flourish

late Preclassic period (300 BC–AD 250). Kaminaljuyú, in Guatemala City, reached its peak from about 400 BC to AD 100, with thousands of inhabitants and scores of temples built on earth mounds.

In El Petén, where limestone was abundant, the Maya began to build platform temples from stone. As each succeeding local potentate had to have a bigger temple, larger and larger platforms were built over existing platforms, eventually forming huge pyramids with a *na*-style shelter on top. The potentate was buried deep within the stack of platforms. El Tigre pyramid at El Mirador, 18 stories high, is believed to be the largest ever built by the Maya. More and more pyramids were built around large plazas, in much the same way that the common people clustered their thatched houses in family compounds facing a communal open space. The stage was set for the flowering of classic Mayan civilization.

## CLASSIC PERIOD (AD 250–900)

During the Classic period the Maya produced prehispanic America's most brilliant civilization in an area stretching from Copán, in modern Honduras, through Guatemala and Belize to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. The great ceremonial and cultural centers included Copán; Quiriguá in southern Guatemala; Kaminaljuyú; Tikal, Uaxactún, Río Azul, El Perú, Yaxhá, Dos Pilas and Piedras Negras, all in El Petén; Caracol in Belize; Yaxchilán and Palenque in Chiapas, Mexico; and Calakmul, Uxmal and Chichén Itzá on the Yucatán Peninsula. All these sites can be visited, with varying degrees of difficulty, today. Around the beginning of the Classic period, Mayan astronomers began using the elaborate Long Count calendar to date all of human history (see p31).

While Tikal began to assume a primary role in Guatemalan history around AD 250, El Mirador had been mysteriously abandoned about a century earlier. Some scholars believe a severe drought hastened this great city's demise.

The Classic Maya were organized into numerous city-states. Each city-state had its noble house, headed by a priestly king who placated the gods by shedding his blood in ceremonies during which he pierced his tongue, penis or ears with sharp objects. (For more on these rites and other Mayan beliefs, see p47.) As sacred head of his community, the king also had to lead his soldiers into battle against rival cities, capturing prisoners for use in human sacrifices. Many a king perished in a battle he was too old to fight. A typical Mayan city functioned as the religious, political and market hub for the surrounding farming hamlets. Its ceremonial center focused on plazas surrounded by tall temple pyramids and lower buildings – so-called palaces – with warrens of small rooms. Stelae and altars were carved with dates, histories and elaborate human and divine figures. Stone causeways called *sacbeob*, probably built for ceremonial use, led out from the plazas.

Mayan priests used a variety of drugs during divination rituals – ranging from fermented maize and wild tobacco to hallucinogenic mushrooms.

*The Maya*, by Michael D Coe, is probably the best single-volume, not-too-long telling of the ancient Maya story – learned and careful, yet readable and well illustrated. Coe's *Breaking the Maya Code* recounts the modern decipherment of ancient Mayan writing, and his *Reading the Maya Glyphs* will help you read ancient inscriptions.

### MAYAN BEAUTY

The ancient Maya considered flat foreheads and crossed eyes beautiful. To achieve these effects, children would have boards bound tight to their heads and wax beads tied to dangle before their eyes. Both men and women made cuts in their skin to gain much-desired scar markings, and women sharpened their teeth to points, another mark of beauty – which may also have helped them to keep their men in line!

Archaeologists estimate that only 10% of Tikal – one of the country's biggest and most famous Mayan sites – has been uncovered.

In the first part of the Classic period, most of the city-states were probably grouped into two loose military alliances centered on Calakmul, in Mexico's Campeche state, and Tikal. Like Kaminaljuyú and Copán, Tikal had strong connections with the powerful city of Teotihuacán, near modern Mexico City. When Teotihuacán declined, Tikal's rival Calakmul allied with Caracol to defeat a weakened Tikal in 562. However, Tikal returned to prominence under a resolute and militarily successful king named Moon Double Comb, also known as Ah Cacao (Lord Chocolate), who ruled from 682 to 734. Tikal conquered Calakmul in 695.

In the late 8th century, trade between Mayan states started to shrink and conflict began to grow. By the early 10th century the cities of Tikal, Yaxchilán, Copán, Quiriguá and Piedras Negras had reverted to little more than minor towns or even villages, and much of El Petén was abandoned. Many explanations, including population pressure and ecological damage, have been offered for the Classic Mayan collapse. Current theories point to three droughts, each lasting several years, around 810, 860 and 910, as major culprits.

## POSTCLASSIC PERIOD (900–1524)

Some of the Maya who abandoned El Petén must have moved southwest into the highlands of Guatemala. In the 13th and 14th centuries they were joined by Maya-Toltec migrants or invaders from the Tabasco or Yucatán areas of Mexico (the Toltecs were a militaristic culture from central Mexico with powerful, wide-ranging influence). Groups of these newcomers set up a series of rival states in the Guatemalan highlands: the most prominent were the K'iche' (or Quiché; capital, K'umarcaaj, near modern Santa Cruz del Quiché), the Kaqchiquels (capital, Iximché, near Tecpán); the Mam (capital, Zaculeu, near Huehuetenango); the Tz'utujil (capital, Chuitinamit, near Santiago Atitlán); and the Poqomam (capital, Mixco Viejo, north of Guatemala City). All these sites can be visited today. Another group from the Yucatán, the Itzáes, wound up at Lago Petén Itzá in the Petén region, settling in part on the island that is today called Flores.

During the late Classic period, population density in Guatemala was over 950 people per square kilometer.

## SPANISH CONQUEST

Spaniards under Hernán Cortés defeated the Aztec Empire based at Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City) in 1521. It only took a couple of years for the conquistadors to turn to Guatemala in their search for wealth. Pedro de Alvarado, one of Cortés' most brutal lieutenants, entered Guatemala in 1524 with about 600 Spanish and Mexican soldiers and the unanswerable advantages of firearms and horses. Alvarado defeated a small K'iche' force

### PLAYTIME WITH THE MAYA

The recreation most favored by the Maya was *juego de pelota* (a ball game), courts for which can still be seen at many archaeological sites. It's thought that the players had to try to keep a hard rubber ball airborne using any part of their body other than their hands, head or feet. A wooden bat may also have been used. In some regions, a team was victorious if one of its players hit the ball through stone rings with holes little larger than the ball itself.

The ball game was taken very seriously and was often used to settle disputes between rival communities. On occasion, it is thought, the captain of the losing team was punished by execution.

### MAYAN COUNTING SYSTEM

The Mayan counting system's most important use – and the one you will encounter during your travels – was in writing dates. It's an elegantly simple system: dots are used to count from one to four; a horizontal bar signifies five; a bar with one dot above it is six, a bar with two dots is seven, and so forth. Two bars signifies 10, three bars 15. Nineteen, the highest common number, is three bars stacked up and topped by four dots.

To signify larger numbers the Maya stack numbers from zero to 19 on top of each other. Thus the lowest number in the stack shows values from one to 19, the next position up signifies 20 times its face value, the third position up signifies 20 times 20 times its face value. The three positions together can signify numbers up to 7999. By adding more positions one can count as high as needed. Zero is represented by a stylized picture of a shell or some other object.

The Maya likely used the counting system from day to day by writing on the ground, the tip of the finger creating a dot, and using the edge of the hand to make a bar.

on the Pacific Slope and then the much larger main K'iche' army near Xelajú (modern Quetzaltenango) soon afterwards – killing the K'iche' leader Tecún Umán in hand-to-hand combat, or so legend has it. Alvarado then sacked the K'iche' capital, K'umarcaaj. The K'iche' had failed to persuade their traditional local enemies, the Kaqchiquels, to join forces against the invaders. Instead, the Kaqchiquels allied with the Spanish against the K'iche' and Tz'utujils, and so the Spanish set up their first Guatemalan headquarters next door to the Kaqchiquel capital, Iximché. The name Guatemala is a Spanish corruption of Quauhtlemallan, the name Alvarado's Mexican allies gave to Iximché (Land of Many Trees).

The romance between the Spanish and the Kaqchiquels soured when the latter couldn't meet the ever-increasing demands for gold, and Alvarado – not surprisingly – turned on them, burning Iximché to the ground. And so it went throughout Guatemala as the megalomaniacal Alvarado sought fortune and renown by murdering and subjugating the Mayan population. The one notable exception was the Rabinal of present-day Baja Verapaz, who survived with their preconquest identity intact and remain one of Guatemala's most traditional groups to this day.

Alvarado moved his base from Tecpán to Santiago de los Caballeros (now called Ciudad Vieja) in 1527, but shortly after his death while in Mexico in 1541, Ciudad Vieja was destroyed by a flood. The Spanish capital was relocated under the same name to a new site nearby, known today as Antigua.

### COLONIAL PERIOD (1524–1821)

The Spanish effectively enslaved Guatemala's indigenous people to work what had been their own land for the benefit of the invaders, just as they did throughout the hemisphere. Refusal to work the land meant death. With the most fertile land and a labor force to work it firmly in hand, the colonists believed themselves omnipotent and behaved accordingly. That is to say, badly.

Enter the Catholic Church and Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas. Las Casas had been in the Caribbean and Latin America since 1502 and had witnessed firsthand the near complete genocide of the indigenous populations of Cuba and Hispaniola. Convinced he could catch more flies with honey

Mesoweb ([www.mesoweb.com](http://www.mesoweb.com)) is a great resource on the Maya, past and present.

To translate a date using the Mayan calendar, visit the Mayan Date Calculator at [www.pauhtun.org/Calendar/tools](http://www.pauhtun.org/Calendar/tools).

### 9th century

The collapse of Classic Mayan civilization

### 13th & 14th centuries

Toltec-Maya migrants from southeast Mexico establish kingdoms in the Guatemalan highlands

## THE MAYAN CALENDAR

The ancient Maya's astronomical observations and calculations were uncannily accurate. They could pinpoint eclipses and their Venus cycle erred by only two hours for periods covering 500 years.

Time was, in fact, the basis of the Mayan religion. They believed the current world to be just one of a succession of worlds, each destined to end in cataclysm and be succeeded by another. This cyclicity enabled the future to be predicted by looking at the past. Most Mayan cities were constructed in strict accordance with celestial movements, and observatories were not uncommon.

Perhaps the best analog to the Mayan calendar is the gears of a mechanical watch, where small wheels mesh with larger wheels, which in turn mesh with other sets of wheels to record the passage of time.

### Tzolkin or Cholq'ij or Tonalamatl

The two smallest wheels in this Mayan calendar 'watch' were two cycles of 13 days and 20 days. Each of the 13 days bore a number from one to 13; each of the 20 days bore a name such as Imix, Ik, Akbal or Xan. As these two 'wheels' meshed, the passing days received unique names. For example, when day one of the 13-day cycle fell on the day named Imix in the 20-day cycle, the day was called 1 Imix. Next came 2 Ik, then 3 Akbal etc. After 13 days, the first cycle began again at one, even though the 20-day name cycle still had seven days to run, so the 14th day was 1 lx, followed by 2 Men, 3 Cib etc. When the 20-day name cycle was finished, it began again with 8 Imix, 9 Ik, 10 Akbal etc. The permutations continued for a total of 260 days, ending on 13 Ahau, before beginning again on 1 Imix.

The two small 'wheels' of 13 and 20 days thus created a larger 'wheel' of 260 days, called a *tzolkin*, *cholq'ij* or *tonalamatl*.

Visitors interested in Mayan culture might want to head to one of the towns still observing the *tzolkin* calendar (such as Momostenango or Todos Santos Cuchumatán) for Wajshakib Batz, the start of the *tzolkin* year. It falls on December 19, 2007; September 4, 2008; May 22, 2009; February 6, 2010; October 24, 2010; and July 11, 2011. Outsiders are not necessarily invited to join in the ceremonies, as they tend to be sacred affairs, but it's still a good time to be in one of these traditional towns.

### Vague Year (Haab)

Another set of wheels in the Mayan calendar watch comprised 18 'months' of 20 days each, which formed the basis of the solar year or *haab* (or *ab*). Each month had a name – Pop, Uo, Zip, Zotz, Tzec etc – and each day had a number from zero (the first day, or 'seating', of the month) to 19.

*Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, by Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube (2000), tells in superbly illustrated detail the histories of 11 of the most important Mayan city-states and their rulers.

than vinegar and horrified at what he saw in the Indies, Las Casas appealed to Carlos V of Spain to stop the violence. Las Casas described the fatal treatment of the population in his influential tract *A Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. The king agreed with Las Casas that the indigenous people should no longer be regarded as chattels and should be considered vassals of the king (in this way they could also pay taxes). Carlos V immediately enacted the New Laws of 1542, which technically ended the system of forced labor. In reality, forced labor continued, but wanton waste of Mayan lives ceased. Las Casas and other Dominican, Franciscan and Augustinian friars went about converting the Maya to Christianity – a Christianity that became imbued with many aspects of animism and ceremony from the indigenous belief system.

A large portion of the Church's conversion 'success' can be attributed to the pacifism with which it approached Mayan communities, the relative

1524

Spaniards under Pedro de Alvarado conquer Guatemala

1527

Alvarado establishes his capital at Santiago de los Caballeros (modern Ciudad Vieja, near Antigua)

So the month Pop ran from 0 Pop (the 'seating' of the month Pop), 1 Pop, 2 Pop and so forth to 19 Pop, and was followed by 0 Uo, 1 Uo and so on.

Eighteen months, each of 20 days, equals 360 days, a period known as a *tun*; the Maya added a special omen-filled five-day period called the *uayeb* at the end of this cycle in order to produce a solar calendar of 365 days. Anthropologists today call this the Vague Year, its vagueness coming from the fact that the solar year is actually 365.24 days long (the reason for the extra day in leap years of our Gregorian calendar).

### Calendar Round

The huge wheels of the *tzolkin* and the *haab* also meshed, so that each day actually had a *tzolkin* name-and-number and a *haab* name-and-number used together: 1 Imix 5 Pop, 2 Ik 6 Pop, 3 Akbal 7 Pop and so on – a total of 18,980 day-name permutations. These repeated every 52 solar years, a period called the Calendar Round. The Calendar Round was the dating system used not only by the Maya but also by the Olmecs, Aztecs and Zapotecs of ancient Mexico. It's still in use in some traditional Guatemalan villages, and you can see why a special Mayan elder has to be designated to keep track of it and alert his community to important days in this complex system.

### Long Count

For a people as obsessed with counting time as the Maya, the Calendar Round has one serious limitation: it only lasts 52 years. After that, it starts again, and there is no way to distinguish a day named 1 Imix 5 Pop in one 52-year Calendar Round cycle from the identically named day in the next cycle.

Hence the Long Count, which the Maya developed around the start of the Classic period (about AD 250). The Long Count uses the *tun*, the year of 18 20-day months, but ignores the *uayeb*, the final five-day period that follows the *tun* in the Vague Year. In Long Count terminology, a day was a *kin* (meaning 'sun'). A 20-*kin* 'month' is called a *uinal*, and 18 *uinals* make a *tun*. Twenty *tuns* make a *katun* (7200 days, nearly 20 of our Gregorian solar years), and 20 *katuns* make a *baktun* (144,000 days, about 394 years). Further gigantic units above *baktun* were only used for grandiose effect, as when a very self-important king wanted to note exactly when his extremely important reign took place in the awesome expanse of time. Curiously for us today, 13 *baktuns* (1,872,000 days, or 5125 Gregorian solar years) form something called a Great Cycle, and the first Great Cycle began on August 11, 3114 BC (some authorities say August 13) – which means it will end on December 23 (or 25), AD 2012. The end of a Great Cycle was a time fraught with great significance – usually fearsome. Stay tuned around Christmas 2012.

respect it extended to traditional beliefs, and the education it provided in indigenous languages. In short, the Catholic Church became extremely powerful in Guatemala quite quickly. No clearer evidence existed of this than the 38 houses of worship (including a cathedral) built in Antigua, which became the colonial capital of all Central America from Chiapas to Costa Rica. But Antigua was razed by a devastating earthquake on July 29, 1773. The capital was moved 25km east to its present site, Guatemala City.

## INDEPENDENCE

By the time thoughts of independence from Spain began stirring among Guatemalans, society was already rigidly stratified. At the very top of the colonial hierarchy were the European-born Spaniards; next were the *criollos*, people born in Guatemala of Spanish blood; below them were the ladinos

*Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*, by Guatemalan Victor Perera, interweaves personal experiences with an exploration of the current situation of the Guatemalan Maya and the long history preceding it.

1541

Santiago de los Caballeros destroyed by flood; a new city (now Antigua) is founded.

1542

Spain enacts the New Laws, officially banning forced labor in its colonies

In their remote hideaway at Flores, the Itzáes managed to remain unconquered by the Spanish until 1697, far later than any other people in Guatemala or Mexico.

or *mestizos*, people of mixed Spanish and Mayan blood; and at the bottom were the Maya and black slaves. Only the European-born Spaniards had any real power, but the *criollos* lorded it over the ladinos, who in turn exploited the indigenous population who, as you read this, still remain on the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder.

Angered at being repeatedly passed over for advancement, Guatemalan *criollos* took advantage of Spanish weakness following a Napoleonic invasion in 1808, and in 1821 successfully rose in revolt. Unfortunately, independence changed little for Guatemala's indigenous communities, who remained under the control of the church and the landowning elite. Despite cuddly-sounding democratic institutions and constitutions, Guatemalan politics has continued to this day to be dominated almost without pause by corrupt, brutal strongmen in the Pedro de Alvarado tradition, for the benefit of the commercial, military, landowning and bureaucratic ruling classes. While the niceties of democracy are observed, real government often takes place by means of intimidation and secret military activities.

Mexico, which was recently independent, quickly annexed Guatemala, but in 1823 Guatemala reasserted its independence and led the formation

### UNCLE SAM GOES SOUTH

The United States' role in the 1954 coup that brought down democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz is well-known, but that's not all, folks. Here's a little sampler of some of the work that's been done since then, in the name of freedom, justice and anticommunism:

- **1962** Conservative Guatemala City newspaper *El Imparcial* reports that US Military presence in Izabal and Zacapa is expanded in response to popular protests against the Fuentes government. Forces are led by Green Berets of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent to make the US presence less conspicuous.
- **1963** General Ydigoras is overthrown in a coup by Colonel Peralta Azurdia. Veteran Latin American correspondent Georgie Anne Geyer reports that 'Top sources within the Kennedy administration have revealed the U.S. instigated and supported the 1963 coup.'
- **1966** US Colonel John D Webber Jr takes command of the American military mission in Guatemala. *Time* magazine reports that Webber expands counterinsurgency training and brings in US Jeeps, trucks, communications equipment and helicopters to give the army more firepower and mobility, and breathes new life into the army's 'civic-action' program.
- **1968–72** Anticommunist violence intensifies. Amnesty International estimates that in this period, between 3000 and 80,000 Guatemalans are killed by the police, the military and right-wing 'death squads'. Tortured, mutilated or burned bodies are found in mass graves or dropped into the Pacific from airplanes; whole villages are rounded up, suspected of supporting the guerrillas, the adult males taken away, never to be seen again.
- **1970** By now, according to the US Agency for International Development, over 30,000 Guatemalan police personnel have received training from the US's Office of Public Safety (OPS). The OPS trained officers in 'interrogation techniques' such as putting an insecticide-filled hood over the victim's head, or electrocuting their testicles.
- **1981** General Vernon Walters, former deputy director of the CIA, on a visit to Guatemala claims that the US hopes to help the Guatemalan government defend 'peace and liberty'. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* report that Guatemalan security forces, official and

1773

Antigua destroyed by earthquake; new capital founded at Guatemala City

1821

Guatemala wins independence from Spain

of the United Provinces of Central America (July 1, 1823), along with El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica. Their union, torn by civil strife from the start, lasted only until 1840 before breaking up into its constituent states. This era brought prosperity to the *criollos* but worsened the lot of the Guatemalan Maya. The end of Spanish rule meant that the crown's few liberal safeguards, which had afforded the Maya a minimal protection, were abandoned. Mayan claims to ancestral lands were largely ignored and huge tobacco, sugar-cane and henequen (agave rope fiber) plantations were set up. The Maya, though technically and legally free, were enslaved by debt peonage to the big landowners.

## THE LIBERALS & CARRERA

The ruling classes of independent Central America split into two camps: the elite conservatives, including the Catholic church and the large landowners, and the liberals, who had been the first to advocate independence and who opposed the vested interests of the conservatives.

During the short existence of the United Provinces of Central America, liberal president Francisco Morazán (1830–39) from Honduras instituted

*Guatemala in the Spanish Colonial Period*, by Oakah L Jones Jr, is a comprehensive assessment of the 300 years of Spanish dominance. Where this book leaves off, Paul Dos-al's *Doing Business with the Dictators: A Political History of United Fruit in Guatemala, 1899–1944* takes over.

unofficial, massacre at least 2000 peasants (accompanied by the usual syndrome of torture, mutilation and decapitation), destroy several villages, assassinate 76 officials of the opposition Christian Democratic Party, scores of trade unionists, and at least six Catholic priests.

- **1982** Using the loopholes in legislation against supporting dictators, the Reagan administration supplies \$13 million worth of military supplies, according to the *New York Times*. The Green Berets continue instructing Guatemalan Army officers in the finer points of warfare.
- **1981–83** Despite the continuing embargo, the *London Guardian* reports that the Guatemala's Air Force helicopter fleet increases from eight to 27, all of them American made. The *Guardian* also reports that Guatemalan officers are once again being trained at the notorious US School of the Americas, then based in Panama.
- **1982** General Efraín Ríos Montt seizes power. The *New York Times* reports that in the next six months, 2600 peasants are massacred. Amnesty International estimates that during his 17-month reign, more than 400 villages are brutally wiped off the map. In December 1982 Reagan, referring to allegations of human-rights abuses, is quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that the Guatemalan leader is receiving 'a bad deal'.
- **1988** Newly opened Guatemalan newspaper *La Época* is blown up by US-backed government terrorists. Julio Godoy, a journalist from the paper, says 'One is tempted to believe that some people in the White House worship Aztec gods – with the offering of Central American blood.'
- **1989** Sister Dianna Ortiz, a nun, is kidnapped, burned with cigarettes, raped repeatedly, and lowered into a pit full of corpses and rats. The *Los Angeles Times* reports her claims that a fair-skinned man who spoke with an American accent seemed to be in charge.
- **1990** The Bush administration, in a show of public anger over the state-backed killing of a US businessman, cuts off military aid to Guatemala, but according to the *New York Times* secretly allows the CIA to provide millions of dollars to the military government to make up for the loss. The annual payments of \$5 million to \$7 million continue into the Clinton administration. Combined sources put the murder toll since Arbenz's overthrow at around 200,000.

### 1823–40

Guatemala is part of the United Provinces of Central America

### 1870s

Liberal governments modernize Guatemala but turn indigenous lands over to coffee plantations



reforms aimed at ending the overwhelming power of the church, the division of society into a *criollo* upper class and an indigenous lower class, and the region's impotence in world markets. This liberal program was echoed by Guatemalan chief of state Mariano Gálvez (1831–38).

But unpopular economic policies, heavy taxes and a cholera epidemic led to an indigenous uprising that brought its leader, a conservative ladino pig farmer, Rafael Carrera, to power. Carrera held power from 1844 to 1865 and undid much of what Morazán and Gálvez had achieved. He also naively allowed Britain to take control of Belize in exchange for construction of a road between Guatemala City and Belize City. The road was never built, and Guatemala's claims for compensation were never resolved, leading to a quarrel that festers to this day.

## LIBERAL REFORMS OF BARRIOS

The liberals returned to power in the 1870s, first under Miguel García Granados, next under Justo Rufino Barrios, a rich young coffee plantation owner who held the title of president, but ruled as a dictator (1873–79). Under Barrios, Guatemala made strides toward modernization, with construction of roads, railways, schools and a modern banking system. Everything possible was done to stimulate coffee production. Peasants in good coffee-growing areas (up to a 1400m altitude on the Pacific Slope) were forced off their land to make way for new coffee *fincas* (plantations), while those living above 1400m (mostly Maya) were forced to work on the *fincas*. This created migrant labor patterns that still exist among some highland groups. Under Barrios' successors a small group of landowning and commercial families came to control the economy, foreign companies were given generous concessions, and political opponents were censored, imprisoned or exiled by the extensive police force.

## ESTRADA CABRERA & MINERVA

Manuel Estrada Cabrera ruled from 1898 to 1920, and his dictatorial style, while bringing progress in technical matters, placed a heavy burden on all but the ruling oligarchy. He fancied himself a bringer of light and culture to a backward land, styling himself the 'Teacher and Protector of Guatemalan Youth.'

He sponsored Fiestas de Minerva (Festivals of Minerva) in the cities, inspired by the Roman goddess of wisdom, invention and technology, and ordered construction of temples to Minerva, some of which still stand (as in Quetzaltenango). Guatemala was to become a 'tropical Athens.' At the same time, however, Estrada Cabrera looted the treasury, ignored the schools and spent extravagantly to beef up the armed forces. He was also responsible for courting the US-owned United Fruit Company, a business of gross hegemonic proportions that set up shop in Guatemala in 1901.

## JORGE UBICO

When Estrada Cabrera was overthrown in 1920, Guatemala entered a period of instability, which ended in 1931 with the election of General Jorge Ubico as president. Ubico had a Napoleon complex and ruled as Estrada Cabrera had, but more efficiently. He insisted on honesty in

Daniel Wilkinson, in *Silence on the Mountain*, uncovers in microcosm the social background to the civil war as he delves into the reasons for the burning of a coffee estate by guerrillas.

1945–54

Enlightened, progressive government by presidents Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz

1954

Arbenz appropriates Guatemalan lands of the US-owned United Fruit Company and is deposed in US-orchestrated coup

government, and modernized the country's health and social welfare infrastructure. Debt peonage was outlawed, but a new bondage of compulsory labor contributions to the government road-building program was established in its place. His reign ended when he was forced into exile in 1944.

## ARÉVALO & ARBENZ

Just when it appeared that Guatemala was doomed to a succession of harsh dictators, the elections of 1945 brought a philosopher – Juan José Arévalo – to the presidential palace. Arévalo, in power from 1945 to 1951, established the nation's social security system, a government bureau to look after indigenous concerns, a modern public health system and liberal labor laws. He also survived 25 coup attempts by conservative military forces.

Arévalo was succeeded by Colonel Jacobo Arbenz, who continued Arévalo's policies, instituting an agrarian reform law that was meant to break up the large estates and foster high productivity on small, individually owned farms. He also expropriated vast lands conceded to the United Fruit Company during the Estrada Cabrera and Ubico years that were being held fallow. Compensation was paid at the value that the company had declared for tax purposes (far below its real value), and Arbenz announced that the lands were to be redistributed to peasants and put into cultivation for food. But the expropriation set off alarms in Washington, which (surprise! surprise!) supported United Fruit. In 1954 the US, in one of the first documented covert operations by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), orchestrated an invasion from Honduras led by two exiled Guatemalan military officers. Arbenz was forced to step down, and the land reform never took place.

Arbenz was succeeded by a series of military presidents elected with the support of the officer corps, business leaders, compliant political parties and the Catholic Church. Violence became a staple of political life. Opponents of the government regularly turned up dead or not at all. Land reform measures were reversed, voting was made dependent on literacy (which disenfranchised around 75% of the population), the secret police force was revived and military repression was common.

In 1960, left-wing guerrilla groups began to form.

## 1960S & 1970S

Guatemalan industry developed fast, but the social fabric became increasingly stressed as most profits from the boom flowed upwards, labor unions organized, and migration to the cities, especially the capital, produced urban sprawl and slums. A cycle of violent repression and protest took hold, leading to the total politicization of society. Everyone took sides; usually it was the poorer classes in the rural areas versus the power elite in the cities. By 1979 Amnesty International estimated that 50,000 to 60,000 people had been killed during the political violence of the 1970s alone.

A severe earthquake in 1976 killed about 22,000 people and left around a million homeless. Most of the aid sent for the people in need never reached them.

*Searching for Everardo,* by US attorney Jennifer K Harbury, tells how she fell in love with and married a URNG guerrilla leader who then disappeared in combat, and of her dedicated and internationally publicized struggles with the US and Guatemalan governments – including a hunger strike outside the White House – to discover his fate.

### 1960s

Left-wing guerrilla groups form in opposition to military governments; civil war starts

### 1976

Earthquake kills 22,000 in Guatemala

## RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ TUM

Of all the unlikely candidates for the Nobel Prize throughout history, a rural indigenous Guatemalan woman would have to be near the top of the list.

Rigoberta Menchú was born in 1959 near Uspantán in the highlands of Quiché department and lived the life of a typical young Mayan woman until the late 1970s, when the country's civil war affected her tragically and drove her into the left-wing guerrilla camp. Her father, mother and brother were killed in the slaughter carried out by the Guatemalan military in the name of 'pacification' of the countryside and repression of communism.

Menchú fled to exile in Mexico, where her story *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, based on a series of interviews, was published and translated throughout the world, bringing the plight of Guatemala's indigenous population to international attention. In 1992 Rigoberta Menchú was awarded the Nobel Prize for peace, which provided her and her cause with international stature and support. The Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation, which she founded with the US\$1.2 million Nobel Prize money, works for conflict resolution, plurality, and human, indigenous and women's rights in Guatemala and internationally.

Guatemalans, especially the Maya, were proud that one of their own had been recognized by the Nobel committee. In the circles of power, however, Menchú's renown was unwelcome, as she was seen as a troublemaker.

Anthropologist David Stoll's book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) contested the truth of many aspects of Menchú's book, including some central facts. The *New York Times* claimed that Menchú had received a Nobel Prize for lying, and of course her detractors had a field day.

Menchú took the controversy in stride, not addressing the specific allegations, and the Nobel Institute made it clear that the prize was given for Menchú's work on behalf of the indigenous, not the content of her book. More than anything, the scandal solidified support for Menchú and her cause while calling Stoll's motives into question.

In 1999, before a Spanish court, the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation formally accused former dictators General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores (1983–86) and Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–83) of genocide. Menchú pressed for extradition proceedings. At the time of writing, however, the case is bogged down in jurisdictional arguments. Menchú has since returned to Guatemala and works alongside the Berger government as a goodwill ambassador for the Peace Accords, a move that has caused some of her previous supporters to question her commitment to leftist politics.

## 1980S

In the early 1980s, military suppression of antigovernment elements in the countryside reached a peak, especially under the presidency of General Efraín Ríos Montt, an evangelical Christian who came to power by coup in March 1982. Huge numbers of people, mostly indigenous men, were murdered in the name of anti-insurgency, stabilization and anticommunism. Guatemalans refer to this scorched-earth strategy as *la escoba*, the broom, because of the way the reign of terror swept over the country. While officials did not know the identities of the rebels, they did know which areas were bases of rebel activity – chiefly poor, rural, indigenous areas – so the government decided to terrorize the populations of those areas to kill off support for the rebels. Over 400 villages were razed, and most of their inhabitants massacred (often tortured as well).

It was later estimated that 15,000 civilian deaths occurred as a result of counter-insurgency operations during Ríos Montt's term of office alone,

Guatemala finally recognized Belizean independence in 1992, but the exact border remained in dispute till 2002, when the two countries agreed on a draft settlement, subject to referenda in both countries.

## 1982–83

State terror against rural indigenous communities peaks during the rule of General Efraín Ríos Montt

## 1992

Guatemalan Maya Rigoberta Menchú awarded the Nobel Prize for peace

not to mention the estimated 100,000 refugees (again, mostly Maya) who fled to Mexico. The government forced villagers to form Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (PACs; Civil Defense Patrols) to do much of the army's dirty work: the PACs were ultimately responsible for some of the worst human-rights abuses during Ríos Montt's rule.

In February 1982 four powerful guerrilla organizations had united to form the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity). Perhaps half a million people, mostly peasants in the western and central highlands and El Petén, actively supported the guerrilla movement, but as the civil war dragged on and both sides committed atrocities, more and more rural people came to feel caught in the crossfire. They were damned if they supported the insurgents and damned if they didn't.

In August 1983 Ríos Montt was deposed by General Oscar Humberto Mejía Victores, but the abuses continued. It was estimated that over 100 political assassinations and 40 abductions occurred each and every month under his rule. Survivors of *la escoba* were herded into remote 'model villages' known as *polos de desarrollo* (poles of development) surrounded by army encampments. The bloodbath led the US to cut off military assistance to Guatemala, which in turn resulted in the 1986 election of a civilian president, Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo of the Christian Democratic Party.

Before turning over power to the civilians, the military established formal mechanisms for its continued control of the countryside. There was hope that Cerezo Arévalo's administration would temper the excesses of the power elite and the military and establish a basis for true democracy. But armed conflict festered on in remote areas and when Cerezo Arévalo's term ended in 1990, many people wondered whether any real progress had been made.

## EARLY 1990S

President Jorge Serrano (1990–93) was an evangelical Christian representing the conservative Movimiento de Acción Solidaria (Solidarity Action Movement). Serrano reopened a dialogue with the URNG, hoping to bring the decades-long civil war to an end. When the talks collapsed, the mediator from the Catholic church blamed both sides for intransigence.

Massacres and other human-rights abuses continued during this period despite the country's return to democratic rule. In one dramatic case in 1990, Guatemalan anthropologist Myrna Mack, who had documented army violence against the rural Maya, was fatally wounded after being stabbed dozens of times by a military death squad. Later that same year, the army massacred 13 Tz'utujil Maya (including three children) in Santiago Atitlán. Outraged, the people of Santiago fought back, becoming the first town to succeed in expelling the army by popular demand. That unprecedented success was a watershed event for the Mayan and human-rights causes in Guatemala.

Serrano's presidency came to depend more on the army for support. In 1993 he tried to seize absolute power, but after a tense few days was forced to flee into exile. Congress elected Ramiro de León Carpio, an outspoken critic of the army's strong-arm tactics, as president to complete Serrano's term.

*La Hija del Puma* (The Daughter of the Puma), directed by Ulf Hultberg, is a powerful 1995 film, based on a true story, about a K'iche' Mayan girl who survives the army massacre of her fellow villagers and sees her brother captured. She escapes to Mexico but then returns to Guatemala in search of her brother.

*Guatemala: Nunca Mas* (1998) published by ODHAG and REMHI details many of the human rights abuses – with moving personal testimonials – committed during Guatemala's civil war.

## 1996

Peace Accords are signed to end the 36-year civil war in which an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans died

## 1998

Odhag declares the army responsible for most civil war deaths; two days later Odhag's coordinator, Bishop Gerardi, is murdered

## PEACE ACCORDS

President de León's elected successor, Álvaro Arzú of the center-right Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN), took office in 1996. Arzú continued negotiations with the URNG and, finally, on December 29, 1996, 'A Firm and Lasting Peace Agreement' was signed at the National Palace in Guatemala City. During the 36 years of civil war, an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans had been killed, a million made homeless, and untold thousands had disappeared. The Peace Accords, as the agreement is known, contained provisions for accountability for the human-rights violations perpetrated by the armed forces during the war and the resettlement of Guatemala's one million displaced people. They also addressed the rights of indigenous peoples and women, health care, education and other basic social services, and the abolition of obligatory military service. Many of these provisions remain unfulfilled.

90% of drug raids in Guatemala fail due to information leaks.

## GUATEMALA SINCE THE PEACE ACCORDS

Any hopes that Guatemala might become a truly just and democratic society have looked increasingly frayed as the years have passed since 1996. A national referendum in 1999 (in which only 18% of registered voters turned out) voted down constitutional reforms formally legislating the rights of indigenous people, adding checks and balances to the executive office and retooling the national security apparatus.

The single most notorious and tragic flouting of peace, justice and democracy came in 1998 when Bishop Juan Gerardi, coordinator of the Guatemalan Archbishop's Human Rights Office (Odhag), was beaten to death outside his home. Two days previously, Bishop Gerardi had announced Odhag's findings that the army was responsible for most of the 200,000 civil war deaths and many other atrocities.

The 1999 presidential elections were won by Alfonso Portillo of the conservative Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG; colloquially known as the Mano Azul – Blue Hand – for its symbol daubed on lampposts, rocks and trees countrywide). Portillo was just a front man for the FRG leader, ex-president General Efraín Ríos Montt, author of the early 1980s scorched-earth state terror campaign. As one common jibe had it, when the two men discussed important decisions, civilian president Portillo always had the last word – 'Yes, general.'

See [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org) for Amnesty International reports on Guatemala.

President Portillo did pay out \$1.8 million in compensation in 2001 to the families of 226 men, women and children killed by soldiers and paramilitaries in the northern village of Las Dos Erres in 1982, but implementation of the Peace Accords stalled and then went into reverse. In 2002 the UN representative for indigenous peoples, after an 11-day Guatemalan tour, stated that 60% of Guatemalan Maya were still marginalized by discrimination and violence. The UN human development index for 2002, comparing countries on criteria such as income, life expectancy, school enrolment and literacy, ranked Guatemala 120th of the world's 173 countries, the lowest of any North, Central or South American country. Poverty, illiteracy, lack of education and poor medical facilities are all much more common in rural areas, where the Mayan population is concentrated.

International organizations, from the European Parliament to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, queued up to criticize the state of human rights in Guatemala. Those brave souls who tried to protect

### 2000–2004

Presidency of Alfonso Portillo of the FRG party, led by Efraín Ríos Montt

### 2005

Hurricane Stan hits southwest Guatemala. Landslides and flooding leave a death toll in the hundreds and leave thousands homeless

human rights and expose abuses were being subjected to threats and killings, the perpetrators of which seemed able to act with impunity. The URNG guerrillas had disarmed in compliance with the Peace Accords, but President Portillo failed to carry out a promise to disband the presidential guard (whose soldiers killed Bishop Gerardi and whose chief had ordered the 1990 Myrna Mack killing), and he doubled the defense budget, taking it beyond the maximum level fixed in the Peace Accords.

Lawlessness and violent crime increased horrifyingly. The US ‘decertified’ Guatemala – meaning it no longer considered it an ally in the battle against the drugs trade – in 2002. The same year, Amnesty International reported that criminals were colluding with sectors of the police and military and local affiliates of multinational corporations to flout human rights. According to police figures, 3630 people died violent deaths in 2002. Lynchings were not uncommon as people increasingly took the law into their own hands.

*El Periódico* newspaper printed an article in 2003 arguing that a ‘parallel power structure’ involving Efraín Ríos Montt had effectively run Guatemala ever since he had been ousted as president 20 years previously. Within days, the paper’s publisher and his family were attacked in their home by an armed gang of 12. Days later, Ríos Montt himself was, incredibly, granted permission by Guatemala’s constitutional court to stand in the elections for Portillo’s successor in late 2003, despite the fact that the constitution banned presidents who had in the past taken power by coup, as Ríos Montt had in 1982. In the end Guatemala’s voters dealt Ríos Montt a resounding defeat, electing Oscar Berger, of the moderately conservative Gran Alianza Nacional, as president till 2008.

The national anticorruption prosecutor, Karen Fischer, fled the country in 2003 in the face of threats received when she investigated Panamanian bank accounts allegedly opened for President Portillo.

The FRG showed its colors fairly blatantly in the run-up to the election by making sizeable ‘compensation’ payments to the former members of the PACs (Civil Defense Patrols), who had carried out many atrocities during the civil war.

For the latest on the progress (or otherwise) of human rights in Guatemala, visit the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA website ([www.ghrc-usa.org](http://www.ghrc-usa.org)) or click on ‘Human Rights’ on the website of the US embassy in Guatemala City (<http://usembassy.state.gov/guatemala>).

## 2006

Guatemala ratifies Cafta, a free trade agreement between the US and Central America

## 2007

US President George W Bush visits Guatemala to discuss CAFTA, the war on drugs and immigration. Massive street protests

# The Culture

## THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

You will be amazed when you first reach Guatemala by just how helpful, polite and unhurried Guatemalans are. Everyone has time to stop and chat and explain what you want to know. This is apparent even if you've just crossed the border from Mexico, where things aren't exactly rushed either. Most Guatemalans like to get to know other people without haste, feeling for common ground and things to agree on, rather than making blunt assertions and engaging in adversarial dialectic. Some observers explain this mild manner as a reaction to centuries of repression and violence by the ruling class, but whatever the truth of that, it makes most Guatemalans a pleasure to deal with.

What goes on behind this outward politeness is harder to encapsulate. Few Guatemalans exhibit the stress, worry and hurry of the 'developed' nations, but this obviously isn't because they don't have to worry about money or employment. They're a long-suffering people who don't expect wealth or good government but make the best of what comes their way – friendship, their family, a good meal, a bit of good company.

Outwardly, it appears that family ties are strong, but beneath the surface you may find that the real reason that three generations live together in one house has more to do with economics than affection.

Guatemalans are a religious bunch – atheists and agnostics are very thin on the ground. People will often ask what religion you are quite early in a conversation. Unless you really want to get into it, saying 'Christian' generally satisfies.

Orthodox Catholicism is gradually giving way to evangelical Protestantism amongst the ladinos, with the animist-Catholic syncretism of the traditional Maya always present. People's faiths give them hope, not only of better things in the afterlife but also of improvements in the here and now – whether through answered prayers or, in the evangelicals' case, of a more sober, more gainful and happier existence without alcohol, gambling or domestic violence.

The tales of violence – domestic violence, civil-war violence, criminal violence – that one inevitably hears in Guatemala sit strangely with the mild-mannered approach you will encounter from nearly everybody. Whatever the explanation, it helps to show why a little caution is in order when strangers meet.

It has been said that Guatemala has no middle class, that it just has a ruling class and an exploited class. It's true that Guatemala has a small, rich, ladino ruling elite whose main goal seems to be to maintain wealth and power at almost any cost. It also has an indigenous Mayan population, comprising more than half the people in the country, that tends to be poor, poorly educated and poorly provided for and has always been kept in a secondary role by the ruling elite. The Mayan villagers' strengths lie in their strong family and community ties, and their traditions. Those who do break out of the poverty cycle, through business or education, do not turn their backs on their communities. But as well as these two groups at the extremes, there is also a large group of working-class and middle-class ladinos, typically Catholic and family-oriented but with aspirations influenced by education, TV, international popular music and North America (of which many Guatemalans have direct experience as migrant workers) – and maybe by liberal ideas of equality and social tolerance. This segment of society has its bohemian/student/artist

Gregory Nava's tragic film *El Norte* (The North) brings home not only the tragedy of Guatemala's civil war but also the illusory nature of many Guatemalans' 'American dream' as it follows an orphaned brother and sister who head north to the US to look for a living.

circles whose overlap with educated, forward-looking Maya may hold the greatest hope for progress toward an equitable society.

## LIFESTYLE

The majority of Guatemalans live in one-room houses of brick, concrete blocks or traditional *bajareque* (a construction of stones, wooden poles and mud), with roofs of tin, tiles or thatch. They have earth floors, a fireplace (but usually no chimney) and minimal possessions – often just a couple of bare beds and a few pots. These small homes are often grouped in compounds with several others, all housing members of one extended family. Thus live most of Guatemala's great Mayan majority, in the countryside, in villages and in towns.

The few wealthier Maya and most ladino families have larger houses in towns and the bigger villages, but their homes may still not be much more than one or two bedrooms and a kitchen that also serves as a living area. Possessions, adornments and decorations may be sparse. Of course, some families have bigger, more comfortable and impressive homes. Middle-class families in the wealthier suburbs of Guatemala City live in good-sized one- or two-story houses with gardens. The most select residences will have their gardens walled for security and privacy. The elite few possess rural as well as urban properties – for example, a coffee *finca* (ranch/plantation) on the Pacific Slope with a comfortable farmhouse, or a seaside villa on the Pacific or Caribbean coast.

Despite modernizing influences – education, cable TV, contact with foreign travelers in Guatemala, international popular music, time spent as migrant workers in the USA – traditional family ties remain strong at all levels of society. Large extended-family groups gather for weekend meals and holidays. Old-fashioned gender roles are strong too: many women have jobs to increase the family income but relatively few have positions of much responsibility. Homosexuality barely peeks its head above the parapet: only in Guatemala City is there anything approaching an open gay scene, and that is pretty much for men only.

Traveling in Guatemala you will encounter a much wider cross-section of Guatemalans than many Guatemalans ever do as they live their lives within relatively narrow worlds. The Guatemalans you'll meet will also tend to be among the most worldly and open-minded, as a result of their contact with tourists and travelers from around the globe. Guatemala has a broad web of people, often young, who are interested in learning, in other cultures, in human rights, in music and the arts, in improving the position of women, the indigenous and the poor, in helping others. You only need to peel away one or two layers of the onion to uncover them.

## ECONOMY

With a young population and an abundance of natural resources, you'd expect the Guatemalan economy to be at least vaguely healthy, but almost all the indicators point in the other direction. By UN figures, 6.4 million Guatemalans – more than half the population – live in poverty. The official national minimum wage is only US\$235 a month in urban areas and US\$173 in rural areas – and not everyone is entitled even to this. A typical school teacher earns around US\$192 a month. Poverty is most prevalent in rural, indigenous areas, especially the highlands. Wealth, industry and commerce are concentrated overwhelmingly in sprawling, polluted Guatemala City, the country's only large city, and home to about 25% of its people.

What little industry that does exist is mostly foreign-owned, or is on such a small scale that it provides limited employment opportunities. A large stumbling block for foreign investors is Guatemala's relative insecurity – even

While many rural houses now have running water, the village *pila* (communal laundry trough) remains a place to get together and exchange gossip.

Guatemala has the highest private ownership per capita of helicopters in the world – a fact many ascribe to the poor state of the highways and the healthy state of drug dealers' bank accounts.



## GETTING ALONG WITH GUATEMALANS

Guatemalans are easy to get along with, as long as you follow a few simple guidelines. The pace of life here is slower, and people rarely launch into whatever they're doing – even in such routine situations as entering a store or taking a bus seat – without a simple greeting: *buenos días* (good morning) or *buenas tardes* (good afternoon) and a smile will get conversations off to a positive start. The same holds true when you enter a room, including public places such as a restaurant or waiting room; make a general greeting to everyone in the room – the requisite *buenos días* or *buenas tardes* will do. When leaving a restaurant, it is common to wish the other diners *buen provecho* (bon appétit). Handshakes are another friendly gesture and are used frequently.

Many Maya, especially in villages, speak only their indigenous language. Try first in Spanish, but if that doesn't work, you may as well be speaking English (or Swahili). Sign and body language are your best friends here.

In recent years, stories circulated in Guatemala that some foreign visitors (particularly white women) were kidnapping Maya children, perhaps to raise them as their own, or even for the grisly purpose of selling their bodily organs. Some local people are extremely suspicious of foreigners who make friendly overtures toward children, especially foreigners who photograph indigenous children. Women traveling alone are treated most distrustfully in this regard, but in 2000, two men (a Japanese tourist and his Guatemalan driver) were beaten to death by a mob in Todos Santos Cuchumatán after the tourist picked up a small child to comfort it.

Many Maya are very touchy about having their photo taken. Always ask permission before taking pictures. Sometimes your request will be denied, often you'll be asked for a quetzal or two, and maybe in a few special instances you'll make new friends.

Many Maya women prefer to avoid contact with foreign men; in their culture, talking with strange men is not something that a virtuous woman does. Male travelers in need of directions or information should find another man to ask. In general the Maya are a fairly private people, and outsiders need to treat them with sensitivity. Some Mayan communities are still very much in a recovery phase from the nightmare of the civil war. Once you get to know someone, they may be willing to share their war stories, which are probably horrific – but don't dig for information, let your hosts offer it. On the language front, using the term *indio* (Indian) to refer to a Maya person carries racist undertones. The preferred term is *indígena*.

Pay attention to your appearance. It's difficult for Guatemalans to understand why a foreign traveler, who is naturally assumed to be rich, would go around looking scruffy when even poor Guatemalans do their best to look neat. When dealing with officialdom (police, border officials, immigration officers), it's a good idea to appear as conservative and respectable as possible.

General standards of modesty in dress have relaxed somewhat; some women wear miniskirts in towns and cities, where formerly this would have been unthinkable. Coastal dwellers tend to show a lot more skin than highland types. Nevertheless, not all locals appreciate this type of attire. Dress modestly when entering churches. Shorts are usually worn, by men or women, only at the beach and in coastal towns. Also think about safety in connection with your appearance. Particularly in the capital, locals will warn you against wearing even cheap imitation jewelry: you could be mugged for it. If you have any wealth, take care not to flaunt it.

the smallest stores are obliged to hire security guards (you'll see them out on the sidewalk toting heavy weaponry), making the cost of doing business in Guatemala relatively high.

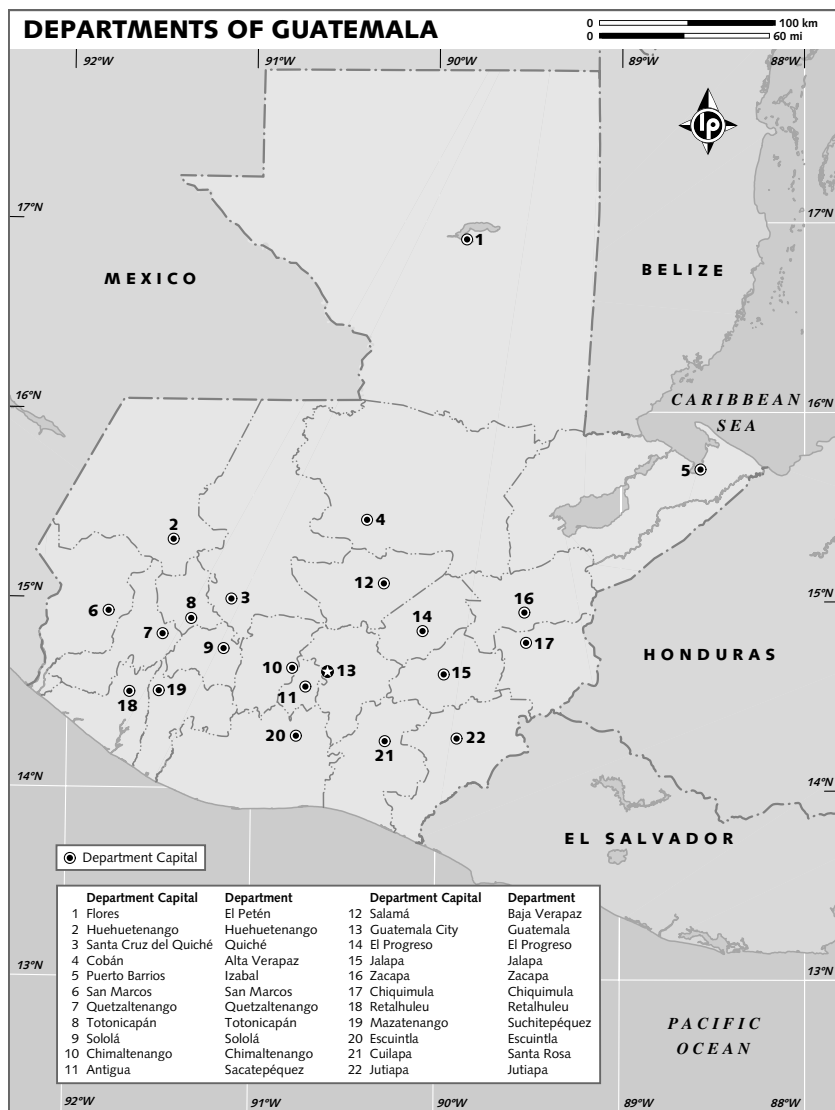
## POPULATION

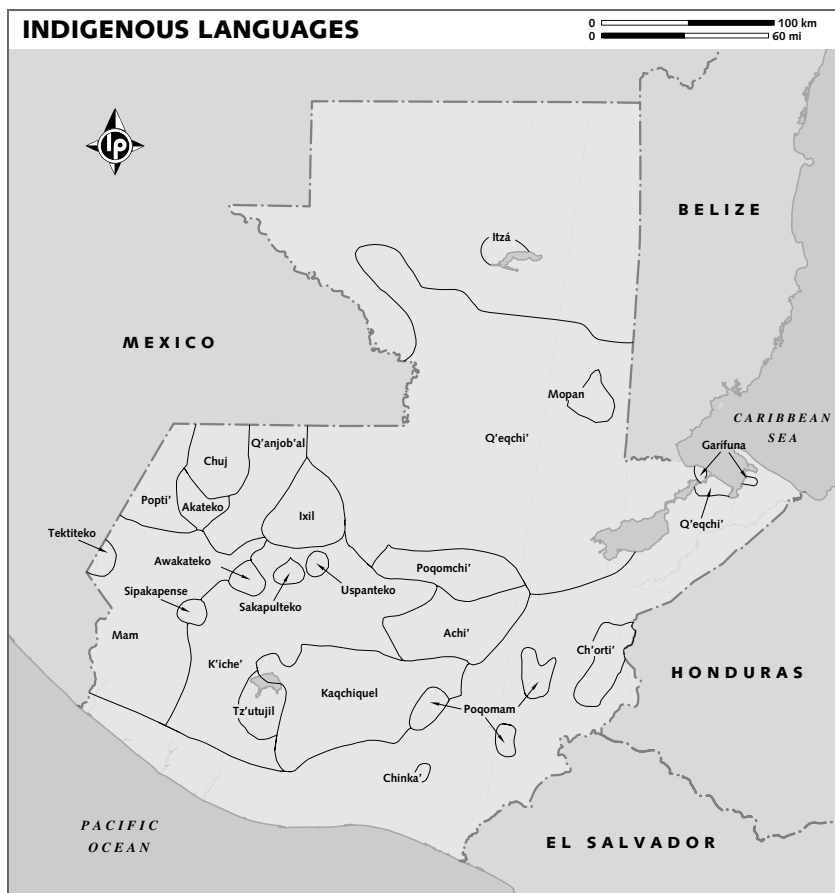
Of Guatemala's 13.1 million people, some 50% to 60% are indigenous. Nearly all of this indigenous population is Mayan, although there is a very small population of non-Mayan indigenous people called the Chinka' (Xinca) in the southeastern corner of the country. The rest of Guatemala's population are nearly all ladinos – descended from both the Maya and from European (mostly Spanish) settlers. There are also a few thousand

For more than 40,000 entries in 31 Mayan languages, check out <http://maya.hum.sdu.dk>.

Garifuna (descended from Caribbean islanders and shipwrecked African slaves) around the Caribbean town of Livingston.

The Maya are spread throughout the country but are most densely concentrated in the highlands, which are home to the four biggest Mayan groups, the K'iche' (Quiché), Mam, Q'eqchi' (Kekchí) and Kaqchiquel (Cakchiquel). Mayan languages are still the way most Maya communicate, with approximately 20 separate (and often mutually unintelligible) Mayan languages spoken in different regions of the country. It's language





Izabal in the east and El Petén in the north are the most sparsely populated of Guatemala's 22 departments, with 38 and 13 people per square kilometer respectively. The national average density is 120 people per square kilometer.

that primarily defines which Mayan people someone belongs to. Though many Maya speak some Spanish, it's always a second language to them – and there are many who don't speak any Spanish.

The population as a whole is densest in the highland strip from Guatemala City to Quetzaltenango, the country's two biggest cities. Many towns and large villages are dotted around this region. Some 45% of the population lives in towns and cities, and 41% are aged under 15.

## SPORTS

The sport that most ignites Guatemalans' passion and enthusiasm is football (soccer). Though Guatemalan teams always flop in international competition, the 10-club Liga Mayor (Major League) is keenly followed by reasonably large crowds. Two seasons are played each year: the Torneo de Apertura (Opening Tournament) from July to November, and the Torneo de Clausura (Closing Tournament) from January to May. The two big clubs are Municipal and Comunicaciones, both from Guatemala City. The 'Classico Gringo' is when teams from Quetzaltenango and Antigua

(the two big tourist towns) play. The national press always has details on upcoming games. Admission to games runs from US\$2 to US\$3.50 for the cheapest areas and US\$12 to US\$20 for the best seats.

Guatemala is recognized as a prime sport fishing destination, as the hosting of the annual Presidential Challenge Sport Fishing Championships out of Puerto Quetzal testifies. It's not a sport that has really caught on with mainstream Guatemalans yet, but the Zona 10 crowd from Guatemala City are starting to pick up on it.

## RELIGION

### Christian

Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion in Guatemala, but it is not the only religion by any stretch of the imagination. Since the 1980s evangelical Protestant sects, around 75% of them Pentecostal, have surged in popularity, and it is estimated that 30% to 40% of Guatemalans are now Evangelicals. These numbers continue to grow as evangelical churches compete hard for further souls.

Catholicism's fall can also be attributed in part to the Civil War. On occasion, Catholic priests were (and still are) outspoken defenders of human rights, attracting persecution (and worse) from dictators at the time, especially the evangelical Ríos Montt.

The number of new evangelical churches, especially in indigenous Mayan villages, is astonishing. You will undoubtedly hear loud Guatemalan versions of gospel music pouring out of some of them as you walk around, and in some places loudspeakers broadcast the music and its accompanying preaching across entire towns. One reason for the Evangelicals' success is their opposition to alcohol, gambling and domestic violence: many women find that husbands who join evangelical churches become more reliable providers.

Catholicism is fighting back with messages about economic and racial justice, papal visits and new saints – Guatemala's most venerated local Christian figure, the 17th-century Antigua-hospital-founder Hermano Pedro de San José de Betancurt, was canonized in 2002 when Pope John Paul II visited Guatemala. Catholicism in the Mayan areas has never been exactly orthodox. The missionaries who brought Catholicism to the Maya in the 16th century wisely permitted aspects of the existing animistic, shamanistic Mayan religion to continue alongside Christian rites and beliefs. Syncretism was aided by the identification of certain Mayan deities with certain Christian saints, and survives to this day. A notable example is the deity known as Maximón in Santiago Atitlán, San Simón in Zunil and Rilaj Maam in San Andrés Itzapa near Antigua, who seems to be a combination of Mayan gods, the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado and Judas Iscariot (see the boxed text, p140).

## Mayan

### ANCIENT MAYAN BELIEFS

For the ancient Maya, the world, the heavens and the mysterious underworld called Xibalbá were one great, unified structure that operated according to the

For up-to-the-minute news on the football scene in Guatemala, log on to [www.guatefutbol.com](http://www.guatefutbol.com).

Football club Municipal, nicknamed Los Rojos (the Reds), tends to nurture young Guatemalan talents, while Comunicaciones (Las Cremas, the Creams) likes to import players from other countries.

### GUATEMALANS ABROAD

About one in every 10 Guatemalans – over 1.5 million people – lives in the US. There has been a steady northward flow of Guatemalans since the 1980s, peaking in 2000 when 177,000 of them moved to the US. Money sent home by these expatriates amounts to US\$3 billion a year, that's US\$3,000 million, more than the combined value of traditional exports, including coffee, sugar and bananas. Over 50% of Guatemalans in the US live either in Los Angeles, New York or Miami.

laws of astrology, cyclical time and ancestor worship. (For more on astrology and the calendar, see the Mayan Calendar boxed text, p31) The towering, sacred ceiba tree symbolized the world-tree, which united the heavens (represented by the tree's branches and foliage), the earth (the trunk) and the nine levels of Xibalbá (the roots). The heavens, the earth and the underworld were also all aspects of the single supreme creator, called Itzamná or Hunab Ku or Lizard House. The world-tree had a sort of cruciform shape and was associated with the color green. In the 16th century, when the Franciscan friars came bearing a cross and required the Maya to venerate it, the symbolism meshed easily with the established Mayan belief in the ceiba or world-tree.

Each point of the compass had a color and a special religious significance. East, where the sun was reborn each day, was most important; its color was red. West, where the sun disappeared, was black. North, where the all-important rains came from, was white. South, the 'sunniest' point of the compass, was yellow. Everything in the Mayan world was seen in relation to these cardinal points, with the world-tree at the center.

Just as the great cosmic dragon shed its blood, which fell as rain to the earth, so humans had to shed blood to link themselves with Xibalbá. Bloodletting ceremonies were the most important religious ceremonies, and the blood of kings was seen as the most acceptable for these rituals. Mayan kings often initiated bloodletting rites to heighten the responsiveness of the gods. Thus, when the Christian friars said that the blood of Jesus, the King of the Jews, had been spilled for the common people, the Maya could easily understand and embrace the symbolism.

Mayan ceremonies were performed in natural sacred places as well as their human-made equivalents. Mountains, caves, lakes, cenotes (natural limestone cavern pools), rivers and fields were, and still are, sacred. Pyramids and temples were thought of as stylized mountains. A cave was the mouth of the creature that represented Xibalbá, and to enter it was to enter the spirit of the secret world. This is why some Mayan temples have doorways surrounded by huge masks: as you enter the door of this 'cave' you are entering the mouth of Xibalbá.

Ancestor worship was very important to the ancient Maya, and when they buried a king beneath a pyramid or a commoner beneath the floor

*Mayan Folktales*, edited by James D Sexton, brings together the myths and legends of the Lake Atitlán area, translated into English.

### THE BIGGEST PARTY IN TOWN

It's Friday night in any small town in Guatemala. The music's pumping, there's singing and clapping hands. Have you just stumbled onto a local jam session? Sorry to disappoint, but what you're most likely listening to is an Evangelical church service.

The Evangelicals are the fastest-growing religion in Latin America – one recent estimate put the number of new Latino converts at a staggering 8000 per day.

The Catholic church is worried – this is their heartland, after all, and the reasons that they're losing their grip aren't all that easy to pin down.

Some say it's the Evangelicals' use of radio and TV that brings them wider audiences; for some it's their rejection of rituals and gestures and customs in favor of real human contact. Others say it's the way the newcomers go to the roughest barrios and accept anybody – including 'the drunks and the hookers', as one priest put it.

For some, they're just more fun – they fall into trances and speak in tongues, heal and prophecy. And then there's the singing – not stale old hymns, but often racy pop numbers with the lyrics changed to more spiritual themes.

One thing's for sure – an Evangelical makes a better husband: drinking, smoking, gambling and domestic violence are all severely frowned upon. Maybe, once again in Guatemala, it's the wives who are really calling the shots.

### THE MAYA BURY THEIR DEAD

It is the night before the funeral, and the shaman is in the house of the deceased, washing candles in holy water. If he misses one, a family member could go blind or deaf. He has counted off the days, and divined that tomorrow will be propitious for the burial.

He prays to the ancestral spirits, asking for the health of the family and the absence of disaster. The list is long and detailed. Personal objects are placed in the coffin; if they're not, the man's spirit might return home looking for them.

Members of the *cofradía* bear the coffin to the cemetery, a trail of mourners following. Four stops are made on leaving the house: at the doorway, in the yard, on entering the street, and at the first street corner. At each stop, mourners place coins on the coffin – in reality to buy candles, symbolically so that the spirit can buy its way out of purgatory and into heaven.

As the coffin is lowered into the ground, mourners kiss handfuls of dirt before throwing them on top. Once the coffin is buried, women sprinkle water on top, packing down the soil and protecting the corpse from werewolves and other dark spirits.

Every All Soul's Day (November 2) the family will come to the cemetery to honor their dead. Sometimes this will stretch over three days (beginning on the first). They will come to clean and decorate the grave, and set out food such as roasted corn, sweet potatoes, vegetable pears, and other fresh-picked fruit of the field. The church bells will ring at midday to summon the spirits, who feast on the smells of the food.

or courtyard of a *na* (thatched Mayan hut), the sacredness of the location was increased.

### MODERN MAYAN RITUALS

Many sites of ancient Mayan ruins – among them Tikal, Kaminaljuyú and K'umarcaaj – still have altars where prayers, offerings and ceremonies continue to take place today. Fertility rites, healing ceremonies and sacred observances to ring in the various Mayan new years are still practiced with gusto. These types of ceremony are directed or overseen by a Mayan priest known as a *tzahorín* and usually involve burning candles and copal (a natural incense from the bark of various tropical trees), making offerings to the gods and praying for whatever the desired outcome may be – a good harvest, a healthy child or a prosperous new year, for example. Some ceremonies involve chicken sacrifices as well. Each place has its own set of gods – or at least different names for similar gods.

Visitors may also be able to observe traditional Mayan ceremonies in places such as the Pascual Abaj shrine at Chichicastenango (p149), the altars on the shore of Laguna Chicabal outside Quetzaltenango (p180), or El Baúl near Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa (p200), but a lot of traditional rites are off-limits to foreigners.

### WOMEN IN GUATEMALA

One of the goals of the 1996 Peace Accords was to improve women's rights in Guatemala. By 2003 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had to report that laws discriminating against women had yet to be repealed. Women got the vote and the right to stand for election in 1946, but by 2003 only eight of the 113 congressional deputies were women. Women's leaders repeatedly criticize Guatemala's *machista* culture, which believes a woman's place is in the home (unless she's out washing the clothes or at the market or collecting firewood). The situation is, if anything, worse for indigenous women in rural areas, who also have to live with most of the country's direst poverty.

*Maya Cosmos – Three Thousand Years of the Shaman's Path*, by David Freidel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker, traces Mayan creation myths from the past to the present with a dose of lively personal experience.

To get a handle on Maximón and shamanism around Lago de Atitlán, check out *Scandals in the House of Birds: Shamans and Priests on Lake Atitlán* by anthropologist and poet Nathaniel Tarn.

For information on Guatemalan women's organizations (and much, much more) visit EntreMundos (www.entremundos.org).

Despite men taking the lead in Guatemala's *machista* culture, women live longer, averaging 71 years against 67 for men.

The international organization Human Rights Watch reported in 2002 that women working in private households were persistently discriminated against. Domestic workers, many of whom are from Mayan communities, lack certain basic rights, including the rights to be paid the minimum wage and to work an eight-hour day and a 48-hour week. Many domestic workers begin working as young adolescents, but Guatemalan labor laws do not provide adequate protection for domestic workers under the age of 18.

Probably of greatest concern have been the reports of escalating violence against women, accompanied by a steadily rising murder rate. These victims were once brushed off as being 'just' gang members or prostitutes, but it is now clear that murder, rape and kidnapping of women is a serious issue. The international community has begun to put pressure on Guatemala to act, but the realities of *machista* society mean that crimes against women are seldom investigated and rarely solved.

## ARTS

### Literature

A great source of national pride is the Nobel Prize for Literature that was bestowed on Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974) in 1967. Best known for *Men of Maize*, his magical-realist epic on the theme of European conquest and the Maya, and for his thinly veiled vilification of Latin American dictators in *The President*, Asturias also wrote poetry (collected in the early volume *Sien de Alondra*, published in English as *Temple of the Lark*). He also served in various diplomatic capacities for the Guatemalan government. Other celebrated Guatemalan authors include short-story master Augusto Monterroso (1921–2003) – look for his *The Black Sheep and Other Fables* – and Luis Cardoza y Aragón (1901–92), principally known for his poetry and for fighting in the revolutionary movement that deposed dictator Jorge Ubico in 1944. Gaspar Pedro González' *A Mayan Life* is claimed to be the first novel written by a Mayan author.

### Music

The marimba is considered the national instrument, although scholars cannot agree whether this xylophone-type instrument already existed in Africa before slaves brought it to Guatemala. Marimbas can be heard throughout the country, often in restaurants or in plazas in the cool of an evening. The very earliest marimbas used a succession of increasingly large gourds as the

### WHO'S YOUR DADDY?

You might have noticed by now that Guatemalans have no problem with long names. Four is the norm – five is not out of the ordinary. As well as being tradition, it's also a form of social control – you can always tell who somebody's parents were, and thus which level of society they come from.

It may not sound like a big deal, but in status-conscious Guatemala, it certainly is. There have been cases of doctors and lawyers denied membership to country clubs here just because they have the wrong (ie indigenous) surname.

Here's how it works: when you're born, you get two first names, much like we do. Next comes your father's family name, then your mother's family name, both these names being from the father's side of the family.

When a woman marries, she often changes the mother's family part of her surname to that of her husband's family, with a 'de' in front of it.

For everyday use, Guatemalans often use their first name, followed by their father's family name.

resonator pipes, but modern marimbas are more commonly outfitted with wooden pipes, though you may see the former type in more traditional settings. The instrument is usually played by three men and there is a carnival-like quality to its sound and traditional compositions.

Guatemalan festivals provide great opportunities for hearing traditional music featuring instruments such as cane flutes, square drums and the *chirimía*, a reed instrument of Moorish roots related to the oboe.

Guatemalan tastes in pop music are greatly influenced by the products of other Latin American countries. Reggaeton is huge – current favorites being Daddy Yankee, Don Omar and Calle 13.

Guatemalan rock went through its golden age in the '80s and early '90s. Bands from this era like Razones de Cambio, Bohemia Suburbana and Viernes Verde still have their diehard fans. The most famous Guatemalan-born musician is Ricardo Arjona, who has lived in Mexico since the '90s.

## Architecture

Modern Guatemalan architecture, apart from a few flashy bank and office buildings along Av La Reforma in Guatemala City, is chiefly characterized by expanses of drab concrete. Some humbler rural dwellings still use a traditional wall construction known as *bajareque*, where a core of stones is held in place by poles of bamboo or other wood, which is faced with stucco or mud. Village houses are increasingly roofed with sheets of tin instead of tiles or thatch – less aesthetically pleasing but also less expensive.

## MAYAN ARCHITECTURE

Ancient Mayan architecture is a mixed bag of incredible accomplishments and severe limitations. The Maya's great buildings are both awesome and beautiful, with their aesthetic attention to intricately patterned facades, delicate 'combs' on temple roofs, and sinuous carvings. These magnificent structures, such as the ones found in the sophisticated urban centers of Tikal, El Mirador and Copán, were created without beasts of burden (except for humans) or the luxury of the wheel. Nor did Mayan builders ever devise the arch: instead, they used what is known as a corbeled arch, consisting of two walls leaning toward one another, nearly meeting at the top and surmounted by a capstone. This created a triangular rather than rounded arch and did not allow any great width or make for much strength. Instead, the building's

*La Casa de Enfrente*, an award-winning film directed by Tonatiúh Martínez, is said to represent the new wave of smart, sophisticated Guatemalan film making.

The marimba became hip in the 1940s when jazz greats like Glenn Miller started to include it in their compositions.

[www.rockrepublik.net](http://www.rockrepublik.net) is the best place to go to find out about up and coming Guatemalan rock bands.

## EDUCATION IN GUATEMALA

Education is free and in theory compulsory between the ages of seven and 14. Primary education lasts for six years, but in reality only 78% of children reach grade five, according to 2005 UN figures. Secondary school begins at age 13 and comprises two cycles of three years each, called *básico* and *magisterio*. Not all secondary education is free – a major deterrent for many. Some people continue studying for their *magisterio* well into adulthood. Completing *magisterio* qualifies you to become a school teacher yourself. It's estimated that only about 34% of children of the 13-to-18 age group are in secondary school. Guatemala has five universities. The Universidad de San Carlos, founded in 1676 in Antigua (later moved to Guatemala City), was the first university in Central America.

Overall, adult literacy is around 70% in Guatemala, but it's lower among women (63%) and rural people. Mayan children who do seasonal migrant work with their families are least likely to get an education, as the time the families go away to work falls during the school year. A limited amount of school teaching is done in Mayan languages – chiefly the big four, K'iche', Mam, Kaqchiquel and Q'eqchi' – but this rarely goes beyond the first couple of years of primary school. Spanish remains the necessary tongue for anyone who wants to get ahead in life.



foundations and substructure needed to be very strong. Once structures were completed, experts hypothesize, they were covered with stucco and painted red with a mixture of hematite and most probably water.

Although formal studies and excavations of Mayan sites in Guatemala have been ongoing for more than a century, much of their architectural how and why remains a mystery. For example, the purpose of *chultunes*, underground chambers carved from bedrock and filled with offerings, continues to baffle scholars. And while we know that the Maya habitually built one temple on top of another to bury successive leaders, we have little idea how they actually erected these symbols of power. All the limestone used to erect the great Mayan cities had to be moved and set in place by hand – an engineering feat that must have demanded astronomical amounts of human labor. Try to imagine mining, shaping, transporting and hefting two million cubic meters of limestone blocks: this is the amount of rock scholars estimate was used in the construction of the Danta complex at El Mirador.

For a 3D representation of the Tikal archaeological site, check out [www.tikalpark.com/map.htm](http://www.tikalpark.com/map.htm).

### COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

During the colonial period (the early 16th to early 19th centuries) churches, convents, mansions and palaces were all built in the Spanish styles of the day, chiefly Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassical. But while the architectural concepts were European-inspired, the labor used to realize them was strictly indigenous. Thus, Mayan embellishments – such as the lily blossoms and vegetable motifs that adorn Antigua's La Merced – can be found on many colonial buildings, serving as testament to the countless laborers forced to make the architectural dreams of Guatemala's newcomers a reality. Churches were built high and strong to protect the elite from lower classes in revolt.

Mary Ellen Miller's well illustrated *Maya Art and Architecture* paints the full picture from gigantic temples to intricately painted ceramics.

Guatemala does not have the great colonial architectural heritage of neighboring Mexico, partly because earthquakes destroyed many of its finest buildings. But the architecture of Antigua is particularly striking, as new styles and engineering techniques developed following each successive earthquake. Columns became lower and thicker to provide more stability. Some Antigua buildings, including the Palacio de los Capitanes and Palacio del Ayuntamiento on the central plaza, were given a double-arch construction to strengthen them. With so many colonial buildings in different states of grandeur and decay, from nearly crumbled to completely restored, Antigua was designated a World Heritage Site by Unesco in 1979.

After the 1776 earthquake, which prompted the relocation of the capital from Antigua to Guatemala City, the Neoclassical architecture of the day came to emphasize durability. Decorative flourishes were saved for the interiors of buildings, with elaborate altars and furniture adorning churches and homes. By this time Guatemalan architects were hell-bent on seeing their buildings stay upright, no matter how powerful the next earthquake. Even though several serious quakes have hit Guatemala City since then, many colonial buildings (such as the city's cathedral) have survived. The same cannot be said for the humble abodes of the city's residents, who suffered terribly when the devastating quake of 1976 reduced their homes to rubble.

### Weaving

Guatemalans make many traditional handicrafts, both for everyday use and to sell to tourists and collectors. Crafts include basketry, ceramics and wood carving, but the most prominent are weaving, embroidery and other textile arts practiced by Mayan women. The beautiful *traje* (traditional clothing) made and worn by these women is one of the most awe-inspiring expressions of Mayan culture.

### WHAT ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE DOING HERE?

There's no doubt that tourism has an impact. Lake Atitlán, for example, is straining under the pressure of its own popularity – the drains for one, just aren't holding up, and every year as more visitors arrive and more hotels are built, more sewerage flows into the lake. Tourists, it seems, kill the thing that they love.

We've all seen tourism at its worst – temples eroded by too many people climbing over them, forests cut down to make way for eco-lodges. Village kids in Nikes leaving their traditional family life to tout hotels or sell drugs.

But there's another side to all this – what looks to the outsider like a culture disappearing often feels to the person living in that culture like progress. And who are we to say that people should stay in their mud huts without electricity while we go home to our plasma screen TVs and microwave dinners?

There are plenty of reasons for the erosion of traditional lifestyles – consumer culture, the lure of big cities, TV and Hollywood to name just a few. Tourism does some terrible stuff, there's no doubt, but managed properly, it can keep cultures alive.

Take backstrap weaving for example. Just about every tourist who comes to Guatemala wants to take a typical fabric home with them. This demand (and the income it generates) means that young people learn to weave, as it offers viable employment. Without the tourists, who knows what they'd be doing for work, or who would be keeping the craft alive.

The most arresting feature of these costumes is their highly colorful weaving and embroidery, which makes many garments true works of art. It's the woman's *huipil*, a long, sleeveless tunic, that receives the most painstaking loving care in its creation. Often entire *huipiles* are covered in a multicolored web of stylized animal, human, plant and mythological shapes, which can take months to complete. Each garment identifies the village from which its wearer hails (the Spanish colonists allotted each village a different design in order to distinguish their inhabitants from each other) and within the village style there can be variations according to social status, as well as the creative individual touches that make each garment unique.

The *huipil* is one of several types of garment that have been in use since prehispanic times. Other colorful types include the *tocoyal*, a woven head-covering often decorated with bright tassels; the *corte*, a piece of material 7m or 10m long that is used as a wraparound skirt; and the *faja*, a long, woven waist sash that can be folded to hold what other people might put in pockets. Blouses are colonial innovations. Mayan men's garments owe more to Spanish influence; nudity was discouraged by the church, so shirts, hats and *calzones*, long baggy shorts that evolved into full-length pants in most regions, were introduced in colonial times. Mayan men now generally wear dull Western clothing, except in places such as Sololá and Todos Santos Cuchumatán where they still sport colorful *traje*. For more on the various types of traditional garments, see p138.

Materials and techniques are changing, but the prehispanic backstrap loom is still widely used. The warp (long) threads are stretched between two horizontal bars, one of which is fixed to a post or tree, while the other is attached to a strap that goes round the weaver's lower back. The weft (cross) threads are then woven in. Throughout the highlands you can see women weaving in this manner outside the entrance to their homes. Nowadays, some *huipiles* and *fajas* are machine made, as this method is faster and easier than hand weaving.

Yarn is still hand-spun in many villages. For the well-to-do, silk threads are used to embroider bridal *huipiles* and other important garments. Vegetable dyes are not yet totally out of use, and red dye from cochineal insects and

Well-illustrated books on Mayan textiles will help you to start identifying their wearers' villages. Two fine works are *Maya of Guatemala – Life and Dress*, by Carmen L. Pettersen, and *The Maya Textile Tradition*, edited by Margot Blum Schevill.

natural indigo are employed in several areas. Modern luminescent dyes go down very well with the Maya, who are happily addicted to bright colors, as you will see.

It's generally in the highlands, which are heavily populated by Maya, that colorful traditional dress is still most in evidence, though you will see it in all parts of the country. The variety of techniques, materials, styles and designs is bewildering to the newcomer, but you'll see some of the most colorful, intricate, eye-catching and widely worn designs in Sololá and Santiago Atitlán, near the Lago de Atitlán, Nebaj in the Ixil Triangle, Zunil near Quetzaltenango, and Todos Santos and San Mateo Ixatán in the Cuchumatanes mountains.

You can learn the art of backstrap weaving in weaving schools in Quetzaltenango and San Pedro La Laguna. To see large collections of fine weaving, don't miss the Museo Ixchel in Guatemala City (p78) or the shop Nim Po't in Antigua (p116).

For a wonderful collection of photos of *huipiles* and other Mayan textiles, see the website of Nim Po't ([www.nimpot.com](http://www.nimpot.com)).

# Environment

## THE LAND

Guatemala covers an area of 109,000 sq km – a little less than the US state of Louisiana; a little more than England. Geologically, most of the country lies atop the North American tectonic plate, but this abuts the Cocos plate along Guatemala's Pacific coast and the Caribbean plate in the far south of the country. When any of these plates gets frisky, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions ensue. Hence the major quakes of 1773, 1917 and 1976 and the spectacular chain of 30 volcanoes – some of them active – running parallel to the Pacific coast from the Mexican border to the Salvadoran border. North of the volcanic chain rises the Cuchumatanes range.

North of Guatemala City, the highlands of Alta Verapaz gradually decline to the lowland of El Petén, occupying northern Guatemala. El Petén is hot and humid or hot and dry, depending on the season. Central America's largest tracts of virgin rain forest straddle El Petén's borders with Mexico and Belize, although this may cease to be true if conservation efforts are not successful.

Northeast of Guatemala City, the valley of the Río Motagua (dry in some areas, moist in others) runs down to Guatemala's short, very hot Caribbean coast. Bananas and sugarcane thrive in the Motagua valley.

Between the volcanic chain and the Pacific Ocean is the Pacific Slope, with rich coffee, cotton, rubber, fruit and sugar plantations, cattle ranches, beaches of black volcanic sand and a sweltering climate.

Guatemala's unique geology also includes tremendous systems of caves. Water coursing for eons over a limestone base created aquifers and conduits that eventually gave way to subterranean caves, rivers and sinkholes when the surface water drained into underground caverns and streams. This type of terrain (known as karst) is found throughout the Verapaces region and makes Guatemala a killer spelunking destination.

Tajumulco (4220m), west of Quetzaltenango, is the highest peak in Central America. La Torre (3837m), north of Huehuetenango, is the highest nonvolcanic peak in Central America.

Guatemala sits at the confluence of three tectonic plates – hence its 30 volcanoes and frequent earthquakes.

### DON'T LET YOUR MOM READ THIS

We don't want to worry you, but Guatemala, along with being Land of the Eternal Spring, the Land of Smiles, and Land of the Trees also seems to be the Land of the Natural Disaster. Don't panic – there are really only three biggies you have to worry about:

- Earthquakes – Sitting on top of three tectonic plates hasn't really worked out that well for Guatemala. The present day capital was founded after Antigua got flattened, but Guatemala City still got pummeled in 1917, 1918 and 1976. This last one left 23,000 people dead.
- Hurricanes – Nobody likes a hurricane. They're windy and noisy and get mud and water everywhere. Guatemala's got two coastlines, so theoretically the hit could come from either angle, although it's statistically more likely to come from the Pacific side. Hurricane Stan was the worst the country's seen, killing more than 1500 and affecting nearly half a million people. Hurricane season runs June to November – for the latest news, you can check with the National Hurricane Center and Tropical Prediction Center ([www.nhc.noaa.gov](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov)).
- Volcanoes – Great to look at, fun to climb, scary when they erupt. Guatemala's got four active volcanoes: Pacaya, Volcán de Fuego, Santiaguito and Tacaná. The nastiest to date was back in 1902, when Santa María erupted, taking 6000 lives. Since late 2006, Pacaya (in between Guatemala City and Escuintla) has been acting up, with increased lava flow and ash. If you feel you need to keep an eye on it, log on to the Humanitarian Early Warning website ([www.hewsweb.org/volcanoes](http://www.hewsweb.org/volcanoes)).

## WILDLIFE

Guatemala's natural beauty, from volcanoes and lakes to jungles and wetlands, is one of its great attractions. With its 19 different ecosystems, the variety of fauna and flora is great – and if you know where to go, opportunities for seeing exciting species are plentiful.

The black bass, introduced into Lake Atitlán for sport fishing in 1958, took over quickly and is now the dominant fish species in the lake.

### Animals

Estimates point to 250 species of mammals, 600 species of birds, 200 species of reptiles and amphibians and many species of butterflies and other insects.

The national bird, the resplendent quetzal (for which the national currency is named) is small but exceptionally beautiful. The male sports a bright-red breast, brilliant blue-green neck, head, back and wings, and a blue-green tail several times as long as the body, which stands only around 15cm tall. The female has far duller plumage. The quetzal's main habitat is the cloud forests of Alta Verapaz. For more on the quetzal, see p215.

Bird-lovers must get hold of either *The Birds of Tikal: An Annotated Checklist*, by Randell A Beavers, or *The Birds of Tikal*, by Frank B Smythe. If you can't find them elsewhere, at least one should be on sale at Tikal itself, and both are useful much further afield.

Exotic birds of the lowland jungles include toucans, macaws and parrots. If you visit Tikal, you can't miss the ocellated turkey, also called the Petén turkey, a large, multicolored bird reminiscent of a peacock. Tikal is an all-round wildlife hot spot: you stand a good chance of spotting howler and spider monkeys, coatis (locally called *pisotes*) and other mammals, plus toucans, parrots and many other birds. Some 300 endemic and migratory bird species have been recorded at Tikal, among them nine hummingbirds and four trogons. Good areas for sighting waterfowl – including the jabiru stork, the biggest flying bird in the western hemisphere – are Laguna Petexbatún and the lakes near Yaxhá ruins, both in El Petén, and the Río Dulce between the Lago de Izabal and Livingston.

Guatemala's forests still host many mammal and reptile species. Petén residents include jaguars, ocelots, pumas, two species of peccary, opossums, tapirs, kinkajous, agoutis (*tepesquintles*; rodents 60cm to 70cm long), white-tailed and red brocket deer, and armadillos. Guatemala is home to at least five species of sea turtle (the loggerhead, hawksbill and green ridley on the Caribbean coast, and the leatherback and olive ridley on the Pacific) and at least two species of crocodile (one found in El Petén, the other in the Río Dulce). Manatees exist in the Río Dulce, though they're notoriously hard to spot.

### Plants

Guatemala has more than 8000 species of plants in 19 different ecosystems ranging from mangrove forests and wetlands on both coasts to the tropical rain forest of El Petén and the pine forests, open grasslands and cloud forests of the mountains. The cloud forests, with their epiphytes, bromeliads and dangling old-man's-beard, are most abundant in Alta Verapaz department. Trees of El Petén include the sapodilla, wild rubber trees, mahogany, several useful palms and the ceiba (Guatemala's national tree for its manifold symbolism to the Maya, also called the kapok or silk-cotton tree in English).

The national flower, the *monja blanca* (white nun orchid), is said to have been picked so much that it's now rarely seen in the wild; nevertheless, with 550 species of orchid (one third of them endemic to Guatemala), you

To see rare scarlet macaws in the wild, the place to head is La Ruta Guacamaya (the Scarlet Macaw Trail) of El Perú ruins in El Petén (p303).

### Snake in the Grass

The Central American or common lancehead, also called the fer-de-lance (locally known as *barba amarilla*, 'yellow beard') is a highly poisonous viper with a diamond-pattern back and an arrow-shaped head. The *cascabel* (tropical rattlesnake) is the most poisonous of all rattlers. Both inhabit jungles and savanna.

### SAVING THE RAINFOREST

The Reserva de Biosfera Maya, in northern Guatemala, along with the adjoining Calakmul reserve in southern Mexico, comprises 3.9 million acres of tropical forest – the largest such area in the Americas after the Amazon.

The forest is shrinking daily, under the strain of human immigration from other parts of Guatemala, illegal logging, oil exploration and the spread of the agricultural frontier.

Wildlife here is particularly vulnerable, too – a victim of habitat loss, unsustainable hunting, and capture for the illegal pet trade. Species that were once abundant, such as scarlet macaws, Baird's tapirs, jaguars, giant anteaters and the Harpy eagle, are becoming rare. Some are presumed extinct.

If you'd like to help save the forest and the habitat of these animals, some well established organizations in the Petén accept volunteers:

**Arcas** ([www.arcasguatemala.com](http://www.arcasguatemala.com)) This animal rescue center has a cooperative agreement with the Guatemalan government and is recognized as the official destination for all confiscated wildlife taken from smugglers in the Reserva de Biosfera Maya.

**Rainforest Alliance** ([www.rainforest-alliance.org](http://www.rainforest-alliance.org)) An organization that works to promote the sustainable use of the forest and green products.

**The Equilibrium Fund** ([www.theequilibriumfund.org](http://www.theequilibriumfund.org)) An alliance of US, Guatemalan and Nicaraguan professionals who work with indigenous and marginalized women to produce food, earn income and raise healthy families without destroying their environment. They focus on the uses and processing techniques for the Maya nut (*Brosimum alicastrum*), a nutritious and easy-to-harvest rain-forest tree food that was once abundant and is now threatened with extinction by logging and land conversion for pasture and agriculture.

shouldn't have any trouble spotting some. If you're interested in orchids, be sure to visit the Vivero Verapaz orchid nursery at Cobán (p219).

Domesticated plants, of course, contribute at least as much to the landscape as wild ones. The *milpa* (maize field) is the backbone of agricultural subsistence everywhere. *Milpas* are, however, usually cleared by the slash-and-burn method, which is a major factor in the diminution of Guatemala's forests. Cities such as Antigua become glorious with the lilac blooms of jacaranda trees in the early months of the year.

### PARKS & PROTECTED AREAS

Guatemala has 92 protected areas, including *reservas de biosfera* (biosphere reserves), *parques nacionales* (national parks), *biotopos protegidos* (protected biotopes), *refugios de vida silvestre* (wildlife refuges) and *reservas naturales privadas* (private nature reserves). Even though some areas are contained within other, larger ones, they amount to 28% of the national territory. Many of the protected areas are remote and hard to access for the independent traveler; the table (p67) shows those that are easiest to reach and/or most interesting to visitors (but excludes volcanoes, nearly all of which are protected, and areas of mainly archaeological interest).

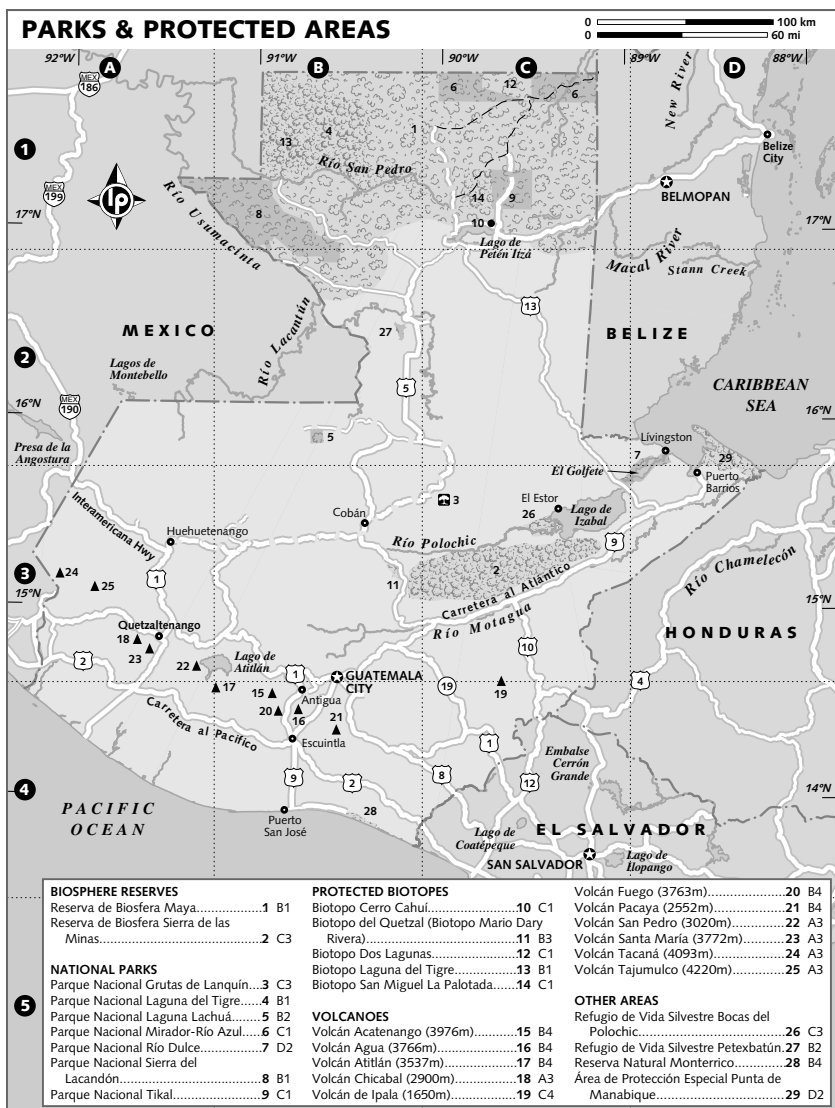
### ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Environmental consciousness is not enormously developed in Guatemala, as the vast amounts of garbage strewn across the country and the choking clouds of diesel gas pumped out by its buses and trucks will quickly tell you. Despite the impressive list of parks and protected areas, genuine protection for those areas is harder to achieve, partly because of official collusion to ignore the regulations and partly because of pressure from poor Guatemalans in need of land.

Guatemala's popularity as a tourist destination leads to a few environmental problems – the question of sewerage and trash disposal around Lake

For some gorgeous watercolor illustrations and a fascinating account of a woman's travels through Guatemala in the late 1800s, look out for *A Pocket Eden*, by Caroline Selvin

To see rare scarlet macaws in the wild, the place to head is La Ruta Guacamaya (the Scarlet Macaw Trail) to El Perú ruins in El Petén (p303).



Ecotravels in Guatemala ([www.planeta.com/guatemala.html](http://www.planeta.com/guatemala.html)) has arresting articles, good reference material and numerous links.

Atitlán being a major one, and some inappropriate development in the rain forests of the Petén being another. Infrastructure development in Guatemala is moving at such a pace, though, that these problems seem minor compared to some of the other challenges that environmentalists face.

Deforestation is a problem in many areas, especially El Petén, where jungle is being felled at an alarming rate not just for timber but also to make way for cattle ranches, oil pipelines, clandestine airstrips, new settlements and new maize fields cleared by the slash-and-burn method.

**PARKS & PROTECTED AREAS**

Protected Area	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit	Page
Área de Protección Especial Punta de Manabique	large Caribbean wetland reserve; beaches, mangroves, lagoons, birds, crocodiles, possible manatee sightings	boat trips, wildlife observation, fishing, beach	any	p260
Biotopo Cerro Cahuí	forest reserve beside Lago de Petén Itzá; Petén wildlife including monkeys	walking trails	any	p285
Biotopo del Quetzal (Biotopo Mario Dary Rivera)	easy-access cloud-forest reserve; howler monkeys, birds	nature trails, bird watching, possible quetzal sightings	any	p215
Biotopo San Miguel La Palotada	adjoins Parque Nacional Tikal; dense Petén forest with millions of bats	jungle walks, visits to El Zotz archaeological site and bat caves	any, drier November–May	p271
Parque Nacional Grutas de Lanquín	large cave system 61km from Cobán	seeing bats; don't miss the nearby Semuc Champey lagoons and waterfalls	any	p224
Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre	remote, large park within Reserva Maya; freshwater wetlands, Petén flora and fauna	spotting wildlife including scarlet macaws, monkeys, crocodiles; visiting El Perú archaeological site; volunteer opportunities at Las Guacamayas biological station	any, drier November–May	p303
Parque Nacional Laguna Lachuá	circular, jungle-surrounded, turquoise lake, 220m deep; many fish, occasional jaguars and tapir	camping, swimming, guided walks	any	p228
Parque Nacional Mirador-Río Azul	national park within Reserva Maya; Petén flora and fauna	jungle treks to El Mirador archaeological site	any, drier November–May	p305
Parque Nacional Río Dulce	beautiful jungle-lined lower Río Dulce between Lago de Izabal and the Caribbean; manatee refuge	boat trips	any	p264
Parque Nacional Tikal	diverse jungle wildlife among Guatemala's most magnificent Mayan ruins	wildlife spotting, seeing Mayan city	any, drier November–May	p291
Refugio Bocas del Polochic	delta of Río Polochic at western end of Lago de Izabal; Guatemala's second-largest freshwater wetlands	bird-watching (more than 300 species), howler monkey observation	any	p256
Refugio de Vida Silvestre Petexbatún	lake near Sayaxché; water birds	boat trips, fishing, visiting several archaeological sites	any	p301
Biotopo Monterrico-Hawaii	Pacific beaches and wetlands; birdlife, turtles	boat tours, bird and turtle watching	June–November (turtle nesting)	p206
Reserva de Biosfera Maya	vast 21,000 sq km area stretching across northern Petén; includes four national parks	jungle treks, wildlife spotting	any, drier November–May	p271
Reserva de Biosfera Sierra de las Minas	cloud-forest reserve of great biodiversity; key quetzal habitat	hiking, wildlife spotting	any	p256



Oil exploration is a concern all over the country – the Guatemalans are scrambling to start drilling in El Petén, as the Mexicans have been doing for years, tapping into a vast subterranean reserve that runs across the border. In his short stint in office, then-president Alfonso Portillo came up with the crazy idea of drilling for oil in the middle of Lago Izabal. The plan was only shelved after massive outcry from international and local environmental agencies and some not too subtle pressure from Guatemala's trading partners. It's a project that's gone but unfortunately not forgotten.

Large-scale infrastructure projects are being announced with frightening regularity, often in environmentally sensitive areas. The two latest involve highways – one from Río Dulce to Tactic, which will take the bulk of the truck traffic once the Belizeans put their own highway through to the southern border. This road will pass through the Polochic region – previously well-preserved and one of the few remaining habitats for the quetzal in Guatemala.

The other megaproject is the upgrading of the road from Playa Grande to Barillas and the flooding of 12 sq km for the construction of the Xalalá dam, a hydroelectric project. The construction will displace local communities, affect water quality downstream and alter the ecology of the area through habitat loss.

The road here, called the Northern Transversal, will eventually lead into Mexico. Local environmental groups fear that the real reason for its construction is to facilitate oil exploration in the Ixcán.

Transnational mining companies are moving in, most notably in San Marcos in the western highlands and the Sierra de las Minas in the south-east. Without the proper community consultation called for by law, the government has granted these companies license to operate open cut mines in search of silver and gold. Chemical runoff, deforestation, eviction of local communities and water pollution are the main issues here. Police have been used to forcibly evict residents and quash community groups' peaceful protests.

On the Pacific side of the country, where most of the population of Guatemala lives, the land is mostly agricultural or given over to industrial interests. The remaining forests in the Pacific coastal and highland areas are not long for this world, as local communities cut down the remaining trees for heating and cooking.

Nevertheless, a number of Guatemalan organizations are doing valiant work to protect their country's environment and biodiversity. The following are good resources for finding out more about Guatemala's natural and protected areas:

**Alianza Verde** ([www.alianzaverde.org](http://www.alianzaverde.org) in Spanish; Parque Central, Flores, Petén) Association of organizations, businesses and people involved in conservation and tourism in El Petén; provides information services such as *Destination Petén* magazine, and Cincap, the Centro de Información Sobre la Naturaleza, Cultura y Artesanía de Petén, in Flores.

**Arcas** (Asociación de Rescate y Conservación de Vida Silvestre; ☎ /fax 2478 4096; [www.arcas.guatemala.com](http://www.arcas.guatemala.com); 4 Av 2-47, Sector B5, Zona 8 Mixco, San Cristobal, Guatemala) NGO working with volunteers in sea turtle conservation and rehabilitation of Petén wildlife (see also p206 and p283).

**Asociación Ak' Tenamit** ([www.aktenamit.org](http://www.aktenamit.org)) Guatemala City (☎ 2254 1560; 11a Av A 9-39, Zona 2) Río Dulce (☎ 7908 3392) Maya-run NGO working to reduce poverty and promote conservation and ecotourism in the rainforests of eastern Guatemala.

**Cecon** (Centro de Estudios Conservacionistas de la Universidad de San Carlos; ☎ 3361 6065; [www.usac.edu.gt/cecon](http://www.usac.edu.gt/cecon) in Spanish; Av La Reforma 0-63, Zona 10, Guatemala City) Manages six public *biotopos* and one *reserva natural*.

**Conap** (Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas; ☎ 2238 0000; <http://conap.online.fr>; Edificio IPM, 5a Av 6-06, Zona 1, Guatemala City) The government arm in charge of protected areas.

Find out about the Yaxhá Private Reserve and what you can do to protect it at [www.yaxhanatural.org](http://www.yaxhanatural.org).

*Timber, Tourists, and Temples*, edited by Richard Primack and others, brings together experts on the Mayan forests of Guatemala, Mexico and Belize for an in-depth look at the problems of balancing conservation with local people's aspirations.

For information about the spectacular Chelehmá cloud forest, check out [www.chelehma.org](http://www.chelehma.org).

**Fundación Defensores de la Naturaleza** (☎ 2440 8138; www.defensores.org.gt in Spanish; 7a Av 7-09, Zona 13, Guatemala City) NGO that owns and administers several protected areas.

**Green Deal** (www.greendeal.org) Certifies and promotes ecologically friendly and low-impact businesses, mostly in the Petén.

**Planeta** (www.planeta.com/guatemala.html) Focuses on sustainable tourism in Guatemala.

**ProPetén** (☎ 7926 1370; www.propeten.org; Calle Central, Flores, Petén) NGO that works in conservation and natural resources management in Parque Nacional Laguna del Tigre.

**Proyecto Ecoquetzal** (☎ /fax 7952 1047; www.ecoquetzal.org; 2a Calle 14-36, Zona 1, Cobán, Alta Verapaz) Works in forest conservation and ecotourism.

Les D Beletsky's *Belize & Northern Guatemala: The Ecotravellers' Wildlife Guide* provides detailed, almost encyclopedic information on the area's flora and fauna.

# Food & Drink

What you eat in Guatemala will be a mixture of Guatemalan food, which is nutritious and filling without sending your taste buds into ecstasy, and international traveler-and-tourist food that's available wherever travelers and tourists hang out. Your most satisfying meals in both cases will probably be in smaller eateries where the boss is in the kitchen him- or herself. Guatemalan cuisine reflects both the old foodstuffs of the Maya (such as corn (maize), beans, squashes, potatoes, avocados, chilies and turkey), and the influence of the Spanish (bread, greater amounts of meat, rice and European vegetables). Modern international cuisine comes in considerable variety in places like Antigua, Guatemala City, Quetzaltenango and around Lake Atitlán. In villages and ordinary towns off the tourist trail, food will be strictly Guatemalan.

## STAPLES & SPECIALTIES

Travelers attempting an Atkins diet may have to put it on hold for the duration. Guatemala is carbohydrate heaven – don't be surprised if your plate comes with rice, potatoes and corn and is served up with a healthy stack of tortillas.

The fundamental staple is indeed the tortilla – a thin round patty of corn dough cooked on a griddle called a *comal*. Tortillas can accompany any meal; if you know Mexican tortillas, you'll find that Guatemalan ones are smaller and a little plumper – except if they appear on a menu under the heading "Tortillas" (with chicken or meat or eggs etc), when they'll be bigger and performing a vaguely pizza-baselike function. Fresh handmade tortillas can be delicious. Tortillas are the exclusive domain of women and you'll see and hear women making them in every corner of the country. Fresh machine-made ones are sold at a *tortillería*. The tortillas sold in restaurants are fairly fresh and kept warm in a hot, moist cloth. These are all right, but will eventually become rubbery. Tortillas accompanying meals are unlimited; if you run out, just ask for more.

The second staple is *frijoles* (fri-hoh-les), or black beans. These can be eaten boiled, fried, refried, in soups, spread on tortillas or with eggs. *Frijoles* may be served in their own dark sauce, as a runny mass on a plate, or as a thick and almost black paste. No matter how they come, they can be delicious and are always nutritious. The third Mayan staple is the squash.

Bread (*pan*; sold in *panaderías*) replaces tortillas in some tourist restaurants and for some Guatemalans who prefer not to eat *a la indígena*.

The above staples accompany all sorts of things at meal times. There's always a hot sauce on hand, either bottled or homemade: the extra kick it provides can make the difference between a so-so and a tasty meal.

On the coast, seafood is the go. Generally, your fish or shrimp will come fried in oil, but for a little more flavor you can always specify *con ajo* (with garlic). These plates come with salad, fries and tortillas. Also good is *caldo de mariscos*, a seafood stew that generally contains fish, shrimp and mussels.

Be careful with salads and fruit: if they have been washed in dodgy water or cut with a dirty knife, they can cause you problems. Salads are so common that it can be hard *not* to eat them. If the establishment you're eating in impresses with its cleanliness, the salad is likely to be safe. If vegetables, salads and the like are washed in purified water, then you're home and dry.

A woman feeding a family of eight (not unusual in Guatemala) makes around 170 tortillas a day.

Tortillas come in all shapes and sizes – mostly they're made from corn meal, but in the south, flour tortillas are common. Coastal dwellers like 'em thick, whereas mountain folk prefer them thinner.

The Recipe Archives website has fine Guatemalan recipes at <http://recipes2.alastra.com/ethnic/guatemalan.html>.

To find out more about Guatemalan food on the internet, visit 1try.com's links at [www.1try.com/recipes\\_g/Guatemalan\\_Cuisine.html](http://www.1try.com/recipes_g/Guatemalan_Cuisine.html).

Most Guatemalans who eat cornflakes like them with hot milk. Specify *leche fría* (cold milk) if you don't fancy this!

## Breakfast

*Desayuno chapín* (Guatemalan breakfast) is a large affair involving (at least) eggs, beans, fried plantains, tortillas and coffee. This will be on offer in any *comedor* (basic eatery). It may be augmented with rice, cheese or *mosh*, an oatmeal/porridge concoction. Scrambled eggs are often made with chopped tomatoes and onions.

Anywhere tourists go, you'll also find a range of other breakfasts on offer, from light continental-style affairs to US-style bacon, eggs, *panqueques* (pancakes), cereals, fruit juice and coffee. Breakfast is usually eaten between 6am and 10am.

## Lunch

This is the biggest meal of the day and is eaten between noon and 2pm. Eateries usually offer a fixed-price meal of several courses called an *almuerzo* or *menú del día*, which may include from one to four courses and is usually great value. A simple *almuerzo* may consist of soup and a main course featuring meat with rice or potatoes and a little salad or vegetables, or just a *plato típico*: meat or chicken, rice, beans, cheese, salad and tortillas. More expensive versions may have a fancy soup or *ceviche* (a choice main course such as steak or fish), salad, dessert and coffee. You can also choose à la carte from the restaurant's menu, but it will be more expensive.

## Dinner & Supper

*La cena* is, for Guatemalans, a lighter version of lunch, usually eaten between 7pm and 9pm. Even in cities, few restaurants will serve you after 10pm. In rural areas, sit down no later than 8pm to avoid disappointment. In local and village eateries supper may be the same as breakfast: eggs, beans and plantains. In restaurants catering to tourists, dinner might be anything from pepper steak to vegetarian Thai curry.

## DRINKS

### Coffee, Tea & Chocolate

While Guatemala grows some of the world's richest coffee, a good cup is only generally available in top-end and (some) tourist restaurants and cafés, because most of the quality beans are exported. Guatemalans tend to drink weak percolated or instant coffee with plenty of sugar. Sometimes sugar is added before it reaches the table, so make sure you specify in advance if you don't want it. Black tea (*té negro*), usually made from bags, can be disappointing. Herbal teas are much better. Chamomile tea (*té de*

### TRAVEL YOUR TASTE BUDS

Guatemala's most sensational flavors can be sampled on the Caribbean coast where the speciality is *tapado*, a mouth-watering casserole of seafood, plantain, coconut milk, spices and a few vegetables. Yummmmm!

Less tongue-tingling but filling and warming on chilly mountain mornings is *mosh*, a breakfast dish that sounds just like what it is, an oatmeal/porridge that ranges from sloppy to glutinous.

More flavorsome, and found widely around the country, is *pepián* – chicken or turkey in a spicy sesame-seed and tomato sauce. Keep your fingers crossed that the bird under the sauce has some flesh on it. *Jocón* is a green stew of chicken or pork with green vegetables and herbs.

In Cobán and the Alta Verapaz department, try *kac-cik* (*kak-ik* or *sack'ik*), a turkey soup/stew with ingredients such as pepper (capsicum), garlic, tomato and chili.

In the Ixil Triangle the local favorite is *boxbol* – maize dough and chopped meat or chicken, wrapped tightly in leaves of the *guisquil* squash and boiled. It's served with salsa.

## ONES TO AVOID

Guatemalans, particularly in El Petén, eat a lot of wild game, much of which ends up on the menu at restaurants. You may come across armadillo, *venado* (venison), paca or *tepesquintle* (agouti), *tortuga* or *caguama* (turtle), and iguana (lizard). Don't order them: they may well be endangered species. The same applies here to the humble *conejo* (rabbit).

Down on the coast, a local favorite is *sopa de tortuga* (turtle soup). The same applies here – it may be delicious, but you're eating something into extinction.

*manzanilla*), common on restaurant and café menus, is a good remedy for a queasy gut.

Hot chocolate or cocoa was the royal stimulant during the Classic period of Mayan civilization, being drunk on ceremonial occasions by the kings and nobility. Their version was unsweetened and dreadfully bitter. Today it's sweetened and, if less authentic, at least more palatable. Hot chocolate can be ordered *simple* (with water) or *con leche* (with milk).

## Juices & Licuados

Fresh fruit and vegetable juices (*jugos*), milkshakes (*licuados*) and long, cool, fruit-flavored water drinks (*aguas de frutas*) are wildly popular. Many cafés and eateries offer them and almost every village market and bus station has a stand with a battalion of blenders. The basic *licuado* is a blend of fruit or juice with water and sugar. A *licuado con leche* uses milk instead of water.

*Limonada* is a delicious thirst-quencher made with lime juice, water and sugar. Try a *limonada con soda*, which adds a fizzy dimension, and you may have a new drink of choice. *Naranjada* is the same thing made with orange juice.

On the coast, the most refreshing nonalcoholic option is a green coconut – you'll see them piled up roadside. The vendor simply slices the top off with a machete and sticks a straw in. If you've never drunk green coconut juice, you *have* to give it a go – it's delicious!

## Alcoholic Drinks

Breweries were established in Guatemala by German immigrants in the late 19th century, but they didn't bring a heap of flavor with them. The two most widely distributed beers are Gallo (rooster; pronounced 'gah-yoh') and Cabro. The distribution prize goes to Gallo – you'll find it everywhere – but Cabro is darker and more flavorful. Moza is the darkest local beer, but its distribution is limited. Brahma, the Guatemalan-produced version of the Brazilian Brahma beer, is preferred by many foreigners (and some locals) and is becoming more widely available, as are 'boutique' imported beers like Heineken and Quilmes. Up north, Mexican beers, especially Tecate, are more readily available and sometimes cheaper than domestic brands.

Rum (*ron*) is one of Guatemala's favorite strong drinks, and though most is cheap in price and taste, some local products are exceptionally fine. Zacapa Centenario is a smooth, aged Guatemalan rum made in Zacapa. It should be sipped slowly and neat, like fine cognac. Ron Botrán Añejo, another dark rum, is also good. Cheaper rums like Venado are often mixed with soft drinks to make potent but cooling drinks such as the *Cuba libre* of rum and Coke. On the coast you'll find *cocos locos*, green coconuts with the top sliced off and rum mixed with the coconut water.

*Aguardiente* is a sugarcane firewater that flows in cantinas and on the streets. Look for the signs advertising Quetzalteca Especial. This is the *aguardiente* of choice.

Guavas are so common on the coast that most people don't even eat them – they just feed them to their pigs.

Guatemalans celebrate All Saints' Day (*Día de Todos los Santos*, November 1) by eating *fiambre*, a large salad-type dish made from meats and/or seafood and a huge range of vegetables and herbs, all prepared in a vinegar base.

For classic Guatemalan recipes collected by a French-trained chef, try tracking down a copy of *Favorite Recipes from Guatemala* by Laura Lynn Woodward.

*Ponche* is a potent potable made from pineapple (or coconut) juice and rum and served hot.

### Water & Soft Drinks

Purified water (*agua pura*) is widely available in hotels, shops and restaurants (see p332). Salvavida is a universally trusted brand. You can order safe-to-drink carbonated water by saying ‘soda.’

Soft drinks are known as *aguas* (waters). If you want straight unflavored water, say ‘*agua pura*’, or you may be asked ‘¿*Qué sabor?*’ (‘What flavor?’).

Hibiscus (*jamaica*; pronounced ‘hah-my-cah’) flowers are the basis of two refreshing drinks. *Agua de jamaica* is a long, cool thirst-quencher. *Té de rosa de jamaica* is a tasty herbal tea.

### WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

A *comedor* is a basic, no-fuss eatery serving straightforward local food in plain surroundings for low prices. If the place looks clean and busy, it will likely be hygienic and good value; the best *comedor* food is equivalent to good home cooking. There is unlikely to be a printed or written menu or even much choice: the staple fare is set breakfasts, set lunches and set suppers, each for around US\$2 to US\$4. The cheapest *comedores* of all are tables and benches set up in markets, with the cooking done on the spot.

A *restaurante* is at least a little fancier than a *comedor*. It will have pretensions (at least) to decor, staff might wear some kind of uniform, and there’ll be a menu – a selection from soups, salads, sandwiches, *antojitos* (snacks), burgers, pasta, pizza, chicken, meat and fish dishes, and desserts. A typical set meal in a decent restaurant costs US\$3 to US\$6, à la carte a little more. In Guatemala City, Antigua, Quetzaltenango and around Lake Atitlán you can eat at specialist and ethnic restaurants and some quite classy, moderately expensive establishments. But even in the capital’s most exclusive spots you’ll find it hard to leave more than US\$30 lighter.

*Comedores* and *restaurantes* typically open from 7am to 9pm, but the hours can vary by up to a couple of hours either way. Places close earlier in small towns and villages, later in cities and tourist destinations. A few fancier city places may not open until 11am or noon and close from 3pm to 6pm. If a restaurant has a closing day, it is usually Sunday, with Antigua restaurants being the exception – if they close it will usually be on Mondays or Tuesdays.

A *café* or *cafetería* will offer, apart from the coffee, food of some kind. This might be light snacks or it might be a fuller range akin to a restaurant. A *pastelería* is a cake shop, and often it will provide tables and chairs where you can sit down and enjoy its baked goods with a drink.

Guatemala has plenty of fast-food restaurants, but most ubiquitous is the local chicken franchise, Pollo Campero.

Bars are open long hours, typically from 10am or 11am to 10pm or 11pm. If they have a closing day, it’s usually Sunday. Officially, no alcohol may be served in Guatemala after 1am, but the smaller the town (and the lower the police presence), the less likely this rule is adhered to.

The biggest internet collection of Guatemalan recipes is for readers of Spanish only, at [www.quetzalnet.com/recetas](http://www.quetzalnet.com/recetas).

### THE FREE MARKET

The market in Guatemala is not just a place to buy your fruit and veg – it’s a meeting point, and in most small towns, the social center.

Guatemalan markets can be overwhelming – they’re noisy, smelly, packed out places that seem chaotic. There is *some* kind of order, though. Generally, the more perishable the product, the deeper inside the market you’ll find it. So if you’re looking for pigs’ feet or goats’ heads, you’re going to have to delve deep. If you’re just on the lookout for a pair of socks, you’ll find them on the periphery.

## DOS & DON'TS

- When you sit down to eat, it's polite to say '*buenos días*' (good morning) or '*buenas tardes*' (good afternoon), as appropriate, to the people at the next table.
- When you leave a restaurant it's polite to say '*buen provecho*' (bon appétit) to those near you. They may say the same to you, which is a way of wishing you good digestion!
- Always tip, around 10%: the wages of the people who cook and serve your food are often pitifully low.

## Quick Eats

Bus snacks can become an important part of your Guatemalan diet, as long bus rides with early departures are not uncommon. Women and girls come on the bus proclaiming '*¡Hay comida!*' ('I've got food!'). This is usually a small meal of tortillas smeared with beans, accompanied by a piece of chicken or a hard-boiled egg. Other snacks include fried plantains, ice cream, peanuts, *chocobananos* (chocolate-covered bananas), *hocotes* (a tropical fruit eaten with salt, lime and nutmeg) and *chuchitos* (small parcels of corn dough filled with meat or beans and steamed inside a corn husk). *Elotes* are grilled ears of corn on the cob eaten with salt and lime.

Much the same cheap fare is doled out by street stalls around bus stations, markets, street corners and so on. It's rare for any of these items to cost as much as US\$1, and if you're on a tight budget you may do quite a lot of your eating at street stalls. On buses and streets alike, take a good look at the cleanliness of the vendor and stall: this is a good indication of how hygienic the food will be.

## VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Given that meat is a bit of a luxury for many Guatemalans, it's not too hard to get by without it. The basic Mayan combination of tortillas, beans and vegetables is fairly nutritious. If you request a set lunch or *plato típico* without meat at a *comedor* you'll still get soup, rice, beans, cheese, salad and tortillas. Indeed some restaurants offer just this combination of items under the name *plato vegetariano*. Be careful with soups: even if they contain no pieces of meat, they may be made with meat stock. Beans, if fried, may have been fried in lard. If you eat eggs, dairy products or fish, you can eat more or less the same breakfast as anyone else, and your options for other meals increase greatly. In most places that travelers go, many restaurants – especially ethnic ones – have nonmeat items on the menu. There are even a few dedicated vegetarian restaurants in cities and tourist haunts. Chinese restaurants are also a good bet for nonmeat food. Plenty of fruit, vegetables and nuts are always available in markets.

## EAT YOUR WORDS

Communicating successfully with restaurant staff is halfway to eating well. For further guidance on pronouncing Spanish words, see p334.

### Useful Phrases

#### Do you have a menu (in English)?

*¿Hay una carta (en inglés)?*

ai oo-na kar-ta (en een-gles)?

#### What is there for breakfast/lunch/dinner?

*¿Qué hay para el desayuno/  
el almuerzo/la cena?*

ke ai pa-ra el de-sa-yoo-no/  
el al-mwer-so/la se-na?

Up for an appetite killer? Have a browse through the US Food and Drug Administration's *Bad Bug Book*. You can also download it free at [www.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/intro.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/intro.html).

For more Guatemalan recipes, log on to Guatemalan Recipes at [www.mayantraditions.com](http://www.mayantraditions.com)

**Is this water purified?***¿El agua es purificada?**El a-gwa es poo-ree-fee-ka-da?***I'm a vegetarian.***Soy vegetariano/a. (m/f)*

soy ve-khe-te-rya-no/a

**I don't eat meat or chicken or fish or eggs.***No como carne ni pollo ni pescado ni huevos.*

no ko-mo kar-ne nee po-yo nee pes-ka-do nee we-vo

**I'd like the set lunch.***Quisiera el menú del día.*

kee-sye-ra el me-noo del dee-a

**Is it spicy-hot?***¿Es picante?*

es pee-kan-te?

**The bill, please.***La cuenta, por favor.*

la kwen-ta, por fa-voor

**Menu Decoder****a la parrilla**

a la pa-ree-lya

grilled, perhaps over charcoal

**a la plancha**

a la plan-cha

grilled on a hotplate

**aguacate**

a-gwa-ka-te

avocado

**ajo**

a-kho

garlic

**antojitos**

an-to-khee-tos

literally 'little whims,' these are snacks or light dishes such as burritos, *chiles rellenos*, *chuchitos*, enchiladas, quesadillas, tacos and tamales. They can be eaten at any time, on their own or as part of a larger meal.**arroz**

a-ros

rice

**atole**

a-to-le

a hot gruel made with maize, milk, cinnamon and sugar

**aves**

a-ves

poultry

**banano**

ba-na-no

banana

**bistec or bistec de res**

bees-tek/bees-tek de res

beefsteak

**burrito**

boo-ree-to

any combination of beans, cheese, meat, chicken or seafood, seasoned with salsa or chili and wrapped in a wheat-flour tortilla

**café (negro/con leche)**

ka-fe (ne-gro/kon le-che)

coffee (black/with milk)

**calabaza**

ka-la-ba-sa

squash, marrow or pumpkin

**caldo**

kal-do

broth, often meat-based

**camarones**

ka-ma-ro-nes

shrimps

**camarones gigantes**

ka-ma-ro-nes khee-gan-tes

prawns

**carne**

kar-ne

meat

**carne asada**

kar-ne a-sa-da

tough but tasty grilled beef

**cebolla**

se-bo-lya

onion

**cerveza**

ser-ve-sa

beer

**ceviche**

se-vee-che

raw seafood marinated in lime juice and mixed with onions, chilies, garlic, tomatoes and cilantro (coriander leaf)

**coco**

ko-ko

coconut

**chicharrón**

chee-cha-ron

pork crackling

**chile relleno**

chee-le re-lye-no

a large chili stuffed with cheese, meat, rice or other foods, dipped in egg whites, fried and baked in sauce

**chuchito**

choo-chee-to

small *tamal***chuletas (de puerco)**

choo-le-tas (de pwer-ko)

(pork) chops

**churrasco**

choo-ras-ko

slab of grilled meat



<b>enchilada</b>	en-chee- <i>la</i> -da	ingredients similar to those in a <i>burrito</i> rolled up in a tortilla, dipped in sauce and then baked or partly fried
<b>ensalada</b>	en-sa- <i>la</i> -da	salad
<b>fajita</b>	fa- <i>khee</i> -ta	grilled meat served on a flour tortilla with condiments
<b>filete de pescado</b>	fee- <i>le</i> -te de pes- <i>ka</i> -do	fish fillet
<b>flan</b>	flan	custard, crème caramel
<b>fresas</b>	<i>fre</i> -sas	strawberries
<b>frijoles</b>	free- <i>kha</i> -les	black beans
<b>frutas</b>	<i>froo</i> -tas	fruit
<b>guacamole</b>	gwa- <i>ka</i> - <i>mo</i> -le	avocados mashed with onion, chili sauce, lemon and tomato
<b>guajolote</b>	gwa- <i>kho</i> - <i>lo</i> -te	turkey
<b>güisquil</b>	gwees- <i>keel</i>	type of squash
<b>hamburguesa</b>	am- <i>boor</i> - <i>gwe</i> -sa	hamburger
<b>helado</b>	e- <i>la</i> -do	ice cream
<b>huachinango</b>	wa-chee- <i>nang</i> -go	red snapper
<b>huevos fritos/revueltos</b>	we- <i>vos free</i> -tos/ <i>re-vwel</i> -tos	fried/scrambled eggs
<b>jamón</b>	<i>kha</i> -mon	ham
<b>jicama</b>	<i>khee</i> -ka-ma	a popular root vegetable resembling a potato crossed with an apple; eaten fresh with a sprinkling of lime, chili and salt, or cooked like a potato
<b>jocón</b>	<i>kho</i> -kon	green stew of chicken or pork with green vegetables and herbs
<b>lechuga</b>	le- <i>chao</i> -ga	lettuce
<b>legumbres</b>	le- <i>goom</i> -bres	root vegetables
<b>licuado</b>	lee- <i>kwa</i> -do	milkshake made with fresh fruit, sugar and milk or water
<b>limón</b>	lee- <i>mon</i>	lime or lemon
<b>limonada</b>	lee- <i>mo</i> - <i>na</i> -da	drink made from lime juice; <i>limonada con soda</i> is made with carbonated water
<b>mariscos</b>	ma- <i>rees</i> -kos	seafood
<b>melocotón</b>	me- <i>lo</i> - <i>ko</i> -ton	peach
<b>miel</b>	myel	honey
<b>milanesa</b>	mee- <i>la</i> - <i>ne</i> -sa	crumbed, breaded
<b>mojarra</b>	mo- <i>kha</i> -ra	perch
<b>mosh</b>	mosh	hot oatmeal/porridge
<b>naranja</b>	na- <i>ran</i> -kha	orange
<b>naranjada</b>	na- <i>ran</i> - <i>kha</i> -da	drink made from orange juice and fizzy water
<b>pacaya</b>	pa- <i>ka</i> -ya	a squash-like staple
<b>papa</b>	pa- <i>pa</i>	potato
<b>papaya</b>	pa- <i>pa</i> -ya	pawpaw
<b>pastel</b>	pas- <i>tel</i>	cake
<b>pato</b>	pa- <i>to</i>	duck
<b>pavo</b>	pa- <i>vo</i>	turkey
<b>pepián</b>	pe- <i>pee</i> -an	chicken and vegetables in a piquant sesame and pumpkin seed sauce
<b>pescado</b>	pes- <i>ka</i> -do	fish (fried in butter and garlic)
<b>(al mojo de ajo)</b>	(al <i>mo</i> - <i>kho</i> de <i>a</i> - <i>kho</i> )	
<b>piña</b>	pee- <i>nya</i>	pineapple
<b>plátano</b>	pla- <i>ta</i> -no	plantain (green banana), edible when cooked (usually fried)

<b>plato típico</b>	<i>pla-to tee-pee-ko</i>	meat or chicken, rice, beans, cheese, salad, tortillas and maybe a soup to start
<b>pollo (asado/frito)</b>	<i>po-lyo (a-sa-do/free-to)</i>	(grilled/fried) chicken
<b>postre</b>	<i>pos-tre</i>	dessert
<b>puerco</b>	<i>pwer-ko</i>	pork
<b>puyaso</b>	<i>poo-ya-so</i>	a choice cut of steak
<b>quesadilla</b>	<i>ke-sa-dee-ya</i>	flour tortilla topped or filled with cheese and occasionally other ingredients and then heated
<b>queso</b>	<i>ke-so</i>	cheese
<b>refacciones</b>	<i>re-fa-chee-o-nes</i>	light meals; see <i>antojitos</i>
<b>salchicha</b>	<i>sal-chee-cha</i>	sausage
<b>salsa</b>	<i>sal-sa</i>	sauce made with chilies, onion, tomato, lemon or lime juice and spices
<b>sopa</b>	<i>so-pa</i>	soup
<b>taco</b>	<i>ta-ko</i>	a soft or crisp corn tortilla wrapped or folded around the same filling as a burrito
<b>tamal</b>	<i>ta-mal</i>	corn dough stuffed with meat, beans, chilies or nothing at all, wrapped in banana leaf or corn husks and steamed
<b>tapado</b>	<i>ta-pa-do</i>	a seafood, coconut milk and plantain casserole
<b>tarta</b>	<i>tar-ta</i>	cake
<b>tocino</b>	<i>to-see-no</i>	bacon or salt pork
<b>tomate</b>	<i>to-ma-te</i>	tomato
<b>tostada</b>	<i>tos-ta-da</i>	flat, crisp tortilla topped with meat or cheese, tomatoes, beans and lettuce
<b>verduras</b>	<i>ver-doo-ras</i>	green vegetables
<b>zanahoria</b>	<i>sa-na-o-rya</i>	carrot

### English–Spanish Glossary

butter	<i>mantequilla</i>	man-te-kee-yah
cup	<i>taza</i>	ta-sa
drink	<i>bebida</i>	be-bee-da
fork	<i>tenedor</i>	te-ne-dor
glass	<i>vaso</i>	va-so
knife	<i>cuchillo</i>	koo-chee-yo
lunch	<i>almuerzo</i>	al-mwer-so
margarine	<i>margarina</i>	mar-ga-ree-na
milk	<i>leche</i>	le-che
pepper (black)	<i>pimienta</i>	pee-myen-ta
plate	<i>plato</i>	pla-to
salt	<i>sal</i>	sal
spoon	<i>cuchara</i>	koo-cha-ra
sugar	<i>azúcar</i>	a-soo-kar
table	<i>mesa</i>	me-sa
tip	<i>propina</i>	pro-pee-na

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